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KILLZONE 3

BULLETSTORM

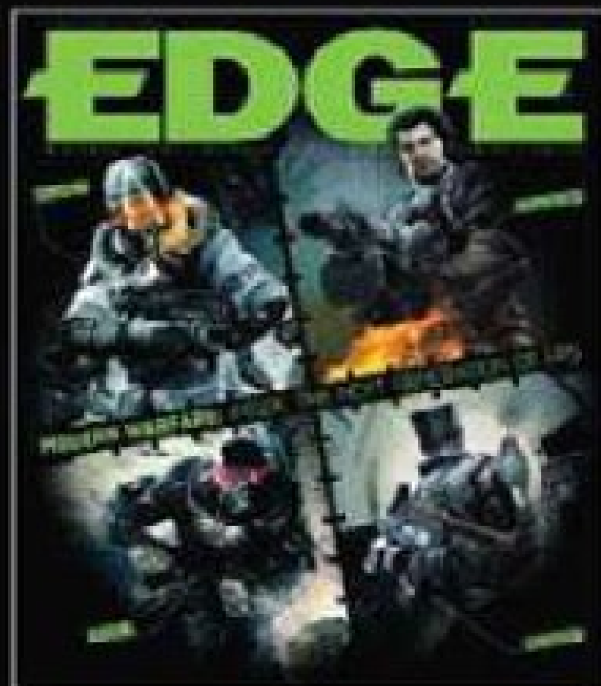
MODERN WARFARE: INSIDE THE NEXT GENERATION OF FPS

CRYSIS 2

BODYCOUNT







With the launch of *Call Of Duty: Black Ops*, Activision once more rolled out the videogame industry equivalent of an event movie. The game destroyed all sales records, achieving $650m of revenue worldwide in its first five days on sale, and went on to earn over $1bn by late December. Within the entertainment industry, said Activision Blizzard chief Bobby Kotick, only James Cameron's Avatar "achieved the billion-dollar revenue milestone this quickly." Given such numbers, it's easy to appreciate why the firstperson shooter has proliferated, to the point that what was once a specialist PC genre is nowadays considered an essential part of every heavyweight publisher's roster, and across as many formats as development studios can manage.

In this issue we've identified just four of the many examples that will be going to war in 2011. On the face of it, they have a great deal in common with not only each other, but of firstperson shooters past, too. With sequels such as *Killzone 3* and *Crysis 2*, clearly that's unavoidable, but it was the power of the brand that put *Black Ops* alongside the most successful cinema release of all time. The creators of *Bulletstorm* and *Bodycount* have no such comforts on which to fall back. It's no coincidence that in many respects they're the bolder pair of the quartet, driven by teams who appreciate how difficult it is to make a mark in what in a short space of time has become the most competitive genre in gaming.

That not one of the firstperson shooters featured in this issue will be supported by a marketing budget of the vast scale that was thrown at *Black Ops* might be a cause of concern for their creators, but what we're looking for in this issue isn't another game whose headlines focus solely on its ability to turn over record revenue. Our search begins on p47.





Autodesk Games Insight

The Latest Scoop from Autodesk Media & Entertainment



> When it comes to global illumination, Autodesk Beast just eats anything we throw at it, and operates with a really low memory footprint. It is a phenomenal tool and vital asset for us.
>
> —Henrik Halén
> Software Engineer
> EA Danger Close Games

Medal of Honor. Image courtesy of EA Danger Close Games.

EA Danger Close Games reboots *Medal of Honor* franchise with help from Autodesk software.

Created by legendary filmmaker Steven Spielberg, the *Medal of Honor* video-game franchise has become something of a legend itself since it was first released in 1999. Set during World War II, the iconic first-person shooter (FPS) game would spawn a slew of different PC, console, and portable versions over the next decade, with names like *Allied Assault*, *Rising Sun*, *Vanguard*, and *Airborne*, to name only a few. The series has been so successful, in fact, that Guinness World Records Gamers Edition awarded *Medal of Honor* a world record as "Best Selling FPS Franchise" in 2008.

For 2010, however, the team at Electronic Arts Danger Close Games (EA DCG) decided a whole new challenge, and a whole new war, was in order. The latest *Medal of Honor* release is a complete reboot of the franchise, shifting the setting from the battlefields of Europe to the windswept deserts of Afghanistan. The EA DCG team based the game in part on real-life events surrounding "Operation Anaconda," the first full-scale battle involving the U.S. military in Afghanistan, in 2002.

Striving for even greater accuracy and realism than previous versions, the EA DCG team used a combination of Autodesk® Maya® software, and Autodesk® Kynapse® and Autodesk® Beast™ middleware to help create the realistic environments, terrain, and action that make the latest version the best yet.

Plans to move the franchise to a new battlefront—and the new millennium—were already in the works in 2007, when EA was finishing up *Medal of Honor: Airborne*. Content development for the new game began in early 2008, and it quickly became clear to the team that the size and scope of the new *Medal of Honor* would go well beyond where the game had gone before.

Lighting

"The new game has an astronomical amount of content in all its levels," says Dave Kintner, lead lighting artist at EA DCG. "Technology has become so much more powerful, even just in the last few years that the quality bar has risen dramatically, especially when it comes to lighting. The massive amounts of information that we deal with now are a big reason behind our decision to use Autodesk Beast middleware. Unlike previous games, where our artists would have to place hundreds of individual lights, the global illumination tools in Beast enabled us to do the lighting right away, and right out of the box."

"Global illumination is absolutely huge on a game like this," says Henrik Halén, software engineer at EA DCG. "As more precise levels of detail and textures have come into new games, it has made realistic lighting more important than ever. If the lighting is inadequate, players are going to sense that something is off. When it comes to global illumination, Autodesk Beast just eats anything we throw at it, and operates with a really low memory footprint. It is a phenomenal tool and a vital asset for us."

Nonplayer Characters

The EA DCG team also made extensive use of the artificial intelligence (AI) capabilities in Autodesk Kynapse middleware to help create the near-instinctual realism of the soldiers portrayed in the game. "We placed Kynapse map builder volumes within the scene to automatically generate a move graph," explains Don Lawton, software engineer at EA DCG. "We were then able to extend the move graph and run transversals to find the best destinations for nonplayer characters. We used the dynamic avoidance system in Kynapse to keep our characters from running into each other, and for things like enemy, cover, and point selection, as well as visible and audible awareness. We were very glad to have Kynapse on such a complex project."

Environments

For the rugged, unforgiving landscape of Afghanistan, the EA DCG team turned to Autodesk Maya software. "We used Maya for almost all of the core background work," says Gerardo Enzo Sprigg, lead environment artist on the game. "Maya helped us sculpt realistic rocks, foliage, and tree elements, and also to create organic locations and terrain. Using Maya made a tricky part of our workflow much faster and easier to accomplish. Our designers would quickly design a level, and then export the raw terrain data into Maya once core game play was in place. We could then rebuild our mesh using the transfer attributes function. Once the mesh was rebuilt, we used Maya to help clean things up nicely and create a seamless look. It was great to have Maya on our side."

To learn more about Autodesk games software and middleware, visit **www.autodesk.com/games**.



Medal of Honor. Image courtesy of EA Danger Close Games.

Autodesk

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"John, I feel good. Just like old times."

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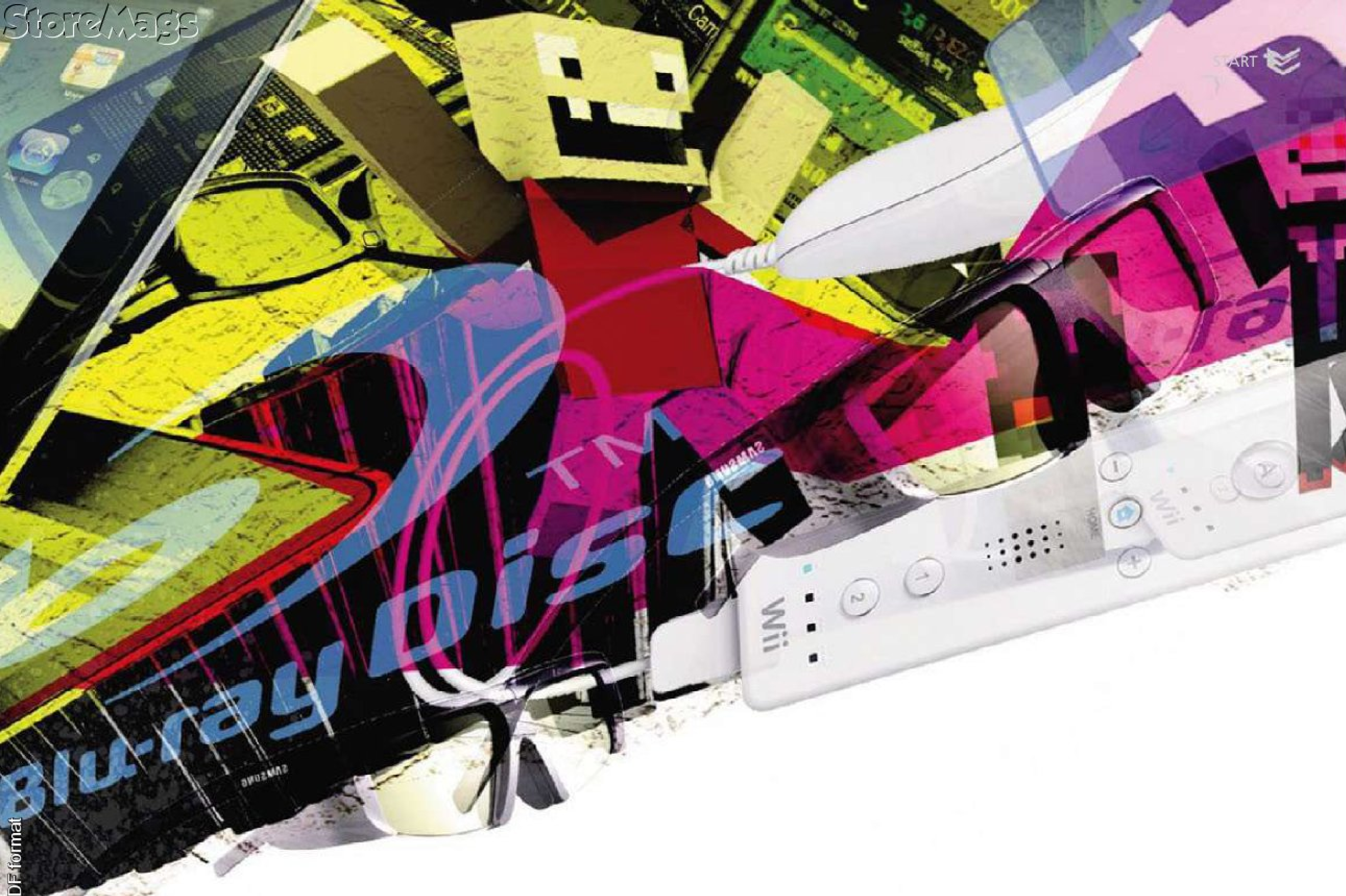




START




START



INDUSTRY

New year, new challenges

As the videogame industry turns a page, what will be the key issues – and opportunities – thrown in its path over the next 12 months?

Only a fool predicts the future; a rich, prolific, important fool. There are plenty of analysts making headlines with their forecasts of continuing trends. A new *Call Of Duty*, a popular *GTA*, a bumper year for Apple… whatever next? In 2011, they'll have to really earn their keep answering that one.

As if the completion of *Duke Nukem Forever* wasn't flabbergasting enough, or indeed the return of *APB* (as a free-to-play reboot), this year promises all kinds of drama. Chapters will end, bubbles may burst, the stakes will be huge, and the shifts could be seismic. Hyperbolic enough?

Wedbush Morgan's Michael Pachter, very much the game industry's alpha analyst, ended 2010 with one of his darkest prophecies to date: that Sony's PSP2 will be "dead on arrival", an anachronism in an age of respectably powered, awesomely versatile smartphones. Given the impending arrival of Sony's PlayStation Phone, he might well be right.

2010 wasn't the kindest year for the traditional handheld: PSP Go struggled to gain traction while Nintendo's DS, observes Arete Research, saw a 19 per cent slump in software sales. Ubiquity, immediacy and an entrenched model of throwaway prices have seen Apple's iPhone, iPad and iPod Touch make the word 'handheld' obsolete in the west.

Ubiquity, immediacy and an entrenched model of throwaway prices have seen Apple's iPhone, iPad and iPod Touch make the word 'handheld' obsolete in the west

But here's the first of those curveballs: Apple's iPhone is not untouchable. The year also ended with news that uptake of Android, Google's open-source smartphone OS, has soared; since Q3 2009, its market share has leapt from 3.5 per cent to 25.5, making it second only to Nokia's Symbian. A 'traditional' handheld, like 3DS, which launches in Japan in February, not only has to justify higher-priced games and the owning of two mobile game platforms – a smartphone and a console, potentially – but enters a violently changing world of thirdparty development. Having adapted to the peculiar economics of iPhone and Android, who will want to look back? If crossplatform engines like Unity3D have their way, maybe they won't have to.

Together with digital distributors like PSN, XBLA and Steam – we'll talk about Facebook in a moment – smartphones now represent the low-cost alternative to triple-A development. But what


That *Duke Nukem Forever* is nearing completion was one of 2010's biggest shocks. Will its quality be equally surprising?

of the middle ground so fertile in the days of PlayStation 2? When we spoke to *Hydrophobia* developer Dark Energy Digital last year, founder Pete Jones described the squeezing out of that retail channel. In a year that saw *Call Of Duty: Black Ops* make the front page of USA Today with astonishing sales of $650 million in five days, middle-tier prospects are dire. It's not the threat of nobody buying the smaller games, but of publishers and retailers finding them unprofitable.

The decline of high-street retail, disguised over the years by its increasing dependence on pre-owned game sales – overall sales at Game dropped 15 per cent last year while the proportion of pre-owned sales rose to 25 per cent – has put the advantages of downloads into bold relief. The ongoing marketing push behind Kinect and Move, soon to be joined by 3DS, still won't hide the sector's failure to adjust to consumer expectations. Ongoing relationships with players are taken for granted in digital distribution, and increasingly more effective than the hard sell. It won't just be the indies reporting store closures and worse in 2011 – not after US giant Blockbuster filed for bankruptcy protection in September last year.

"There are games that do amazingly well. But there are too many titles released every week, and a lot of those are falling in that 25,000-or-less category"

Meanwhile, in the crowded world of indie development, it's attention economics that decide who sinks or swims. Rivio's *Angry Birds*: ten million units and rising. Markus Persson's *Minecraft*: $350,000 per day at its peak. But it's hard to forget the words of Hello Games' **Sean Murray**, who called XBLA a "slaughterhouse for smaller developers. There are games that do amazingly well. But there are too many titles released every week, and a lot of those are falling in that 25,000-or-less category."

Such is the price of market growth in an industry now full of markets, where even the biggest faces a tough new year. Arete estimates that sales of Wii software fell by 14 per cent in the first nine months of 2010, signalling a change in the nature of crossover casual play. Yes, the world and her mother are playing games. But mother is starting to discriminate, finding a quick fix on Facebook or her phone, not to mention a cheaper and more connected one. Doom and gloom for Nintendo? No, but enough to give it pause.

We should be careful talking about gaming 'fixes', what with December's latest revival of the gaming addiction furore. The BBC's Panorama programme failed to produce any new or convincing evidence, but rather freak anecdotes of gamers dropping out of uni thanks to Xbox 360. Moreover, it overlooked the bigger addiction story: the rise of a new breed of casual games that absorb money as well as time. The 'freemium' business model of games like *Frontierville*, *Smurf Village* and *DarkOrbit* could, had the programme makers chosen to put it this way, enable some users to spend hundreds if not thousands of pounds on a single title. If the tabloids start searching, surely they'll find someone.

On a more global scale, publishers have found new revenue streams in so-called customer segmentation, and not just in the sense of DLC and its ongoing role in the fights against piracy and high-street pawnbrokers. Many games come with collector's editions (the term 'limited edition' seems to have lost its currency now anyone with two brain cells knows it applies to just about anything); 2011 will see more of them, both generally and for individual titles. Anything more outlandish than the *Call Of Duty: Black Ops* Prestige Edition, with its remote-controlled 'spy car' and its onboard video camera? Surely not. Regardless, publishers want you to spend more on a single game this year than you have before.

That's if you've got change from that 3DTV, of course. Despite the aggressive – some might say offensive, given its 'inferior HD' mottos – marketing of 3D, consumer interest has been reportedly slow. In August 2010, research by Deloitte found that only 89 of 4,199 surveyed


The *Call Of Duty: Black Ops* Prestige Edition includes a remote-controlled car featuring a spy camera, setting a new precedent for expensive alternative versions. Can it be topped this year?







Angry Birds (above) and *Minecraft* (left) have demonstrated the revenue-generating opportunities available to small-scale developers, without the need for heavyweight marketing budgets. Making an indie hit in 2011 will be about the power of word of mouth and the effectiveness of modern digital distribution

were likely to invest over the following 12 months. Ignoring the cosmetic issues of just wearing 3D glasses – oh, those adverts – consumer knowledge of its gaming application is tiny, the quality of experience is varied, TV propagation is practically non-existent, and the sets are still expensive. A lot like early HD, then, which you could argue we're still experiencing. 3D implementations are feasible enough for plenty of games in 2011; quality of optimisation is the unknown.

With Nvidia making headway on PC, leading the charge in the living room are Sony and PS3. In 2010, Sony has achieved what many thought was impossible, if not irrelevant: it made media convergence matter again. While Microsoft's restrictions alienated services like 4OD and LoveFilm, PS3 became a patchwork of different streaming services, building on the success of its BBC iPlayer and PlayTV tuner. Nielsen Company research shows that only 49 per cent of time spent using PS3 was spent on gaming (compared to 62 per cent on Xbox 360). Hogging the remaining time were DVDs, music, the aforementioned streaming and web browsing. The hardcore 'it's all about the games' rhetoric was a fad, Sony winning fans with 'It only does everything'.




Games such as *Frontierville* (above left), *Smurf Village* and *DarkOrbit* (above right) used freemium business models to great effect in 2010. The micropayment play model was extensively explored last year, but it will be exploited on an entirely different scale throughout 2011

Much the same is true of 2011's most explosive new devices: tablets. Microsoft may have rained on the parade slightly with its November announcement that Kinect, having sold a million units in its first ten days, was on track to become the fastest-adopted piece of consumer electronics, phones aside, of all time. Just a few months earlier, it was Apple making the claim, selling a million iPads in under a month and 4.5 million in its first quarter – three times faster adoption than iPhone. Portentously, NPD Group researcher DisplaySearch reported a knock-on effect in the netbook market: a year-on-year shipment drop of 13 per cent. For developers, it isn't just new lead platforms that might emerge, but a new usage model of 'lean back' personal computing.

All that's left is the unknown – and there's always plenty. Back in January 2010, a survey by MyVoucherCodes.co.uk suggested that one in three Britons believed Apple was developing a game console; half said they'd buy one if it did.

"If Apple were to release a videogames console, it would be the Kryptonite to Microsoft's Xbox 360's Superman," said site founder **Mark Pearson**. "I believe [Steve] Jobs' Apple would dominate videogaming in the way iPod has become synonymous with MP3 players, and iPhones have the title of 'must-have' mobile phone." Now that would be a year to remember. 

SOUND BYTES

"I spent literally days reading his entire website and all of the essays he's written and a lot of the interviews that he's done. I hate to say this but I've almost come around to his way of thinking on this. I think he was wrong to state that videogames will never be art but if you really read what he views film as – I don't think we're really there yet, I honestly don't. In some ways he's almost convinced me that he might be right that videogames are not yet – but I think it's incredibly important that they are and that they're seen as art."
Monkey Island/DeathSpank designer **Ron Gilbert** on the power of Roger Ebert's anti-game argument

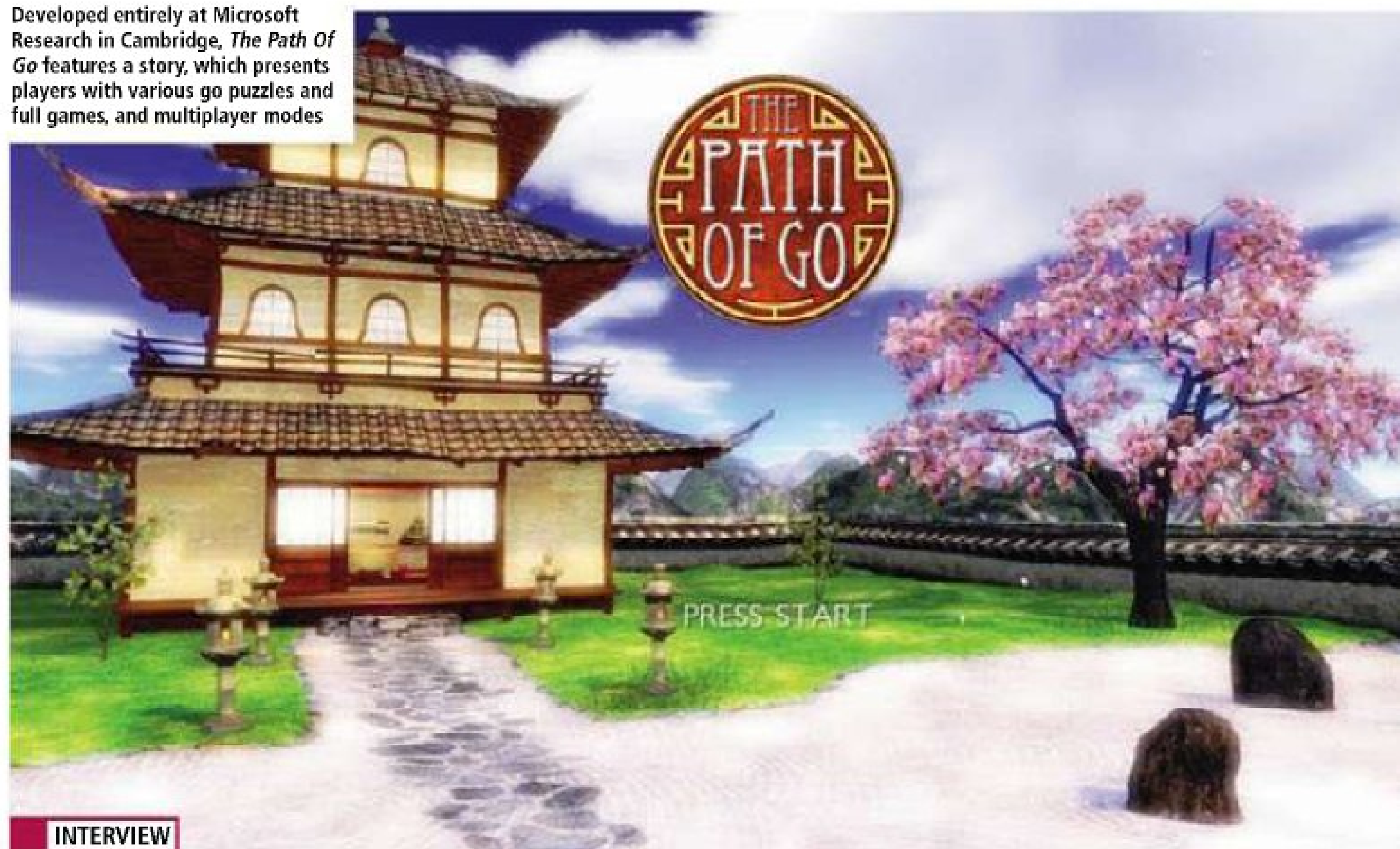
"I'm not going to make a comparison to *Grand Theft Auto*… but okay, I'm going to make a slight comparison to *Grand Theft Auto*. The first two *GTA* games, nobody knows anything about them, right? *Grand Theft Auto 1*? Nobody even said that word. They never said two either. It wasn't until *Grand Theft Auto 3* that people really got excited about what they were doing."
Kevin Sheller, senior producer on *Conduit 2*, promises big things from… the third game?

"Kratos would have a FUCKALITY and fuck the SHIT out of Sonya AND Katana at the same motherfucking TIME!!!!"
God Of War designer **David Jaffe** applies an intellectual perspective to the revelation that Kratos will appear in the new *Mortal Kombat*

"It's just been refined and adapted to the iOS screen, which honestly I think is where the design works best."
Chair Entertainment's **Donald Mustard** nonchalantly reveals that *Infinity Blade* was originally planned as a Kinect game

"It turned out nobody bought it. So [we stopped] making them. We killed that one pretty quickly."
Microsoft global marketeer **Albert Penello** laments the extinction of Xbox 360 faceplates

Developed entirely at Microsoft Research in Cambridge, *The Path Of Go* features a story, which presents players with various go puzzles and full games, and multiplayer modes



INTERVIEW

Making Xbox intelligent

Why Microsoft Research has looked to the console world to explore AI that apes the human mind

Microsoft Research isn't in the habit of making XBLA games. But *The Path Of Go* isn't a normal XBLA game. Although the platform is no stranger to boardgames of many types, few have such a weight of pioneering AI research behind them: behind the unassuming façade of this take on the 2,500-year-old Chinese game lies an attempt to address one of artificial intelligence's biggest challenges.

When chess computer programs began beating the best human players during the 1990s, go became researchers' next mark in the sand. They saw, in its simple rules and deep strategy, an opportunity to create AI that's notionally similar to human intelligence, since it has to be based on intuition. That's because go is so profoundly complex. The number of possible chess games is around ten to the power of 60, with 20 to 30 possible moves each turn. The number of go scenarios is around ten to the power of 700, with 361 moves on the first turn alone. For reference, the number of atoms in the known universe is thought to be around ten to the power of 80.

The system is easily applicable to the RTS genre: "Even using random moves, it could give the computer some idea of what your current position is and the best thing to do"

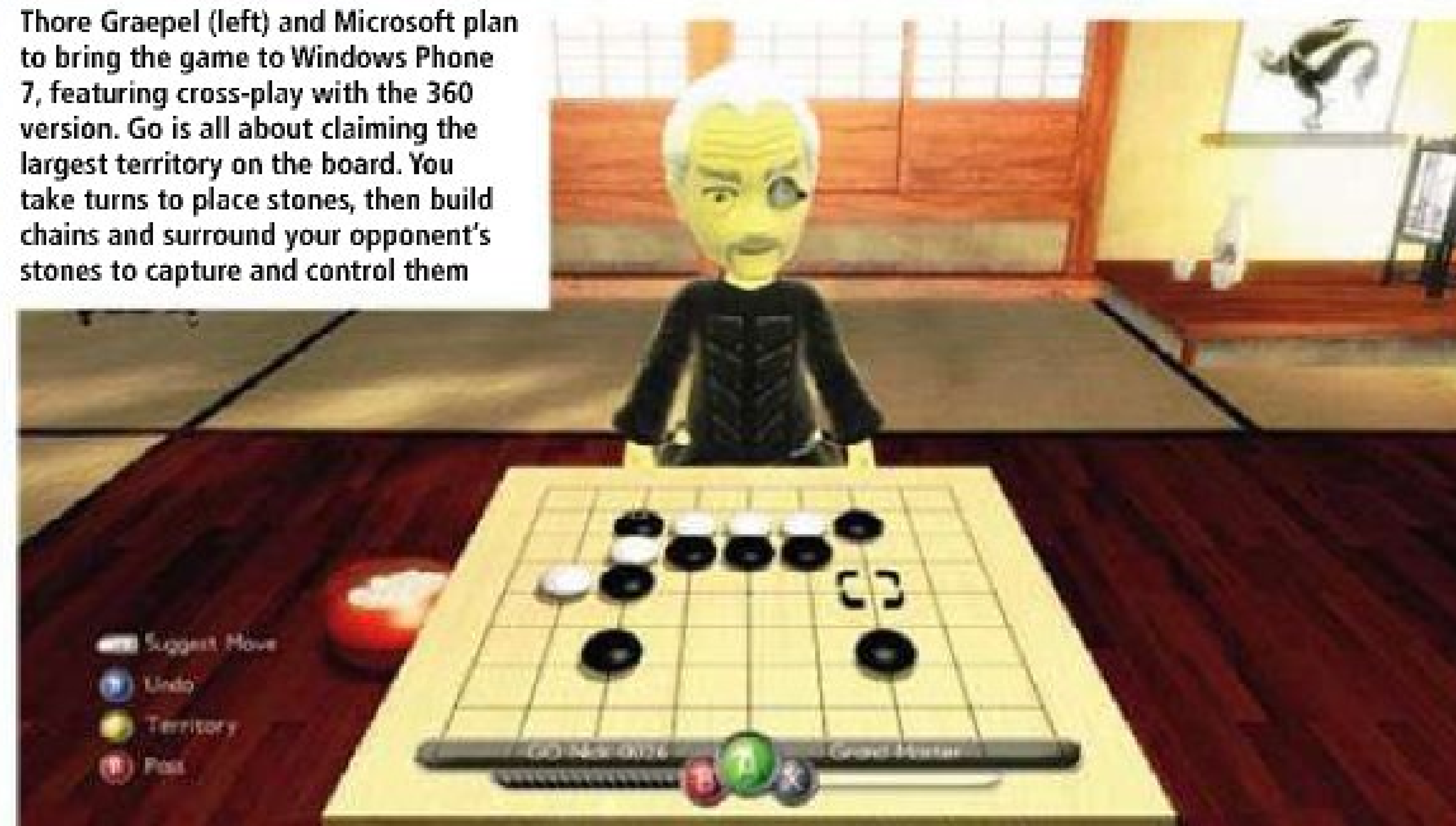
That's a lot of variables for a computer to consider, and the methods chess programs use, which involve planning moves several turns in advance, simply can't work. A conservative estimate suggests that IBM's Roadrunner, one of the most powerful supercomputers, would need 138 hours per turn to work eight moves in advance in a game of go. As such, until the mid-'00s, computers could only play go at a weak amateur level. Then the Monte-Carlo tree search method revolutionised the scene. "The real breakthrough with computer go was the idea that you play random moves until the end of the game, then you evaluate whether black or white won," explains **Thore Graepel**, who led *The Path Of Go*'s AI and is senior researcher at Microsoft Research. "Do that 10,000 times, say, and the fraction black wins versus what white wins will give an indication of whether black has a better position than white." The tree part of the concept is an algorithm that builds a table of win/loss statistics for given situations and runs further simulations to prove or disprove them.

The Path Of Go, however, takes it one step further, to the extent that Graepel says it's the most sophisticated system to date. It prunes the tree, allowing the program to focus its efforts on only the parts of the board that might lead to the best plays. "A human develops some intuition and experience of this and will focus their attention only on the important points," Graepel says, "but how can we know which make sense to look at more and which we can disregard?" The answer lies in taking 250,000 records of dan-level players (go has the same ranks as Japanese martial arts) and the program learning the configurations of the board that relate to good moves. For example, a professional will tend to use certain shapes that capture stones; the system will learn that capturing a stone in that way is a good thing to do.

The upshot is that the computer no longer needs to address every possible move. "It makes the tree search much easier, making the Monte-Carlo able to search deeper and more thoroughly and come up with better results," Graepel asserts. "It's the best out there because nobody has used so many professional games or with such a sophisticated Bayesian learning algorithm."







Thore Graepel (left) and Microsoft plan to bring the game to Windows Phone 7, featuring cross-play with the 360 version. Go is all about claiming the largest territory on the board. You take turns to place stones, then build chains and surround your opponent's stones to capture and control them



Being human

How does Microsoft's AI assess risk and victory?

A drawback to the Monte-Carlo AI system is that it tends to make relentlessly logical moves, leading to a quirk that Graepel says is very frustrating to many human players. Having recognised that it's in a winning position, it sacrifices the rest of its territory so it typically wins by the thinnest margin possible, all to reduce risk. And yet that's also exactly the behaviour of master human players, who always play safe when they're confident of a win, reducing risk and also playing to the cultural rule that they should never humiliate their opponent.

And it's crucial to *Path Of Go*, because it runs on an Xbox 360. "We wouldn't have been able to do any reasonable Monte-Carlo on the Xbox, because we only have time for very few simulations. If they're spread thinly across a huge tree then you get no statistical significance and hence the moves will be random." At a low AI setting, *The Path Of Go* makes pretty much instantaneous moves, and at high level it keeps players waiting for 20 seconds, because it adds many more simulations to arrive at better moves.

But despite its mechanical innovations, *The Path Of Go* is far from the strongest go AI there is. Zen, the current leader, which usually runs on an eight-core computer, plays at around three dan, while Graepel estimates *The Path Of Go* is between five and ten kyu. "For the purpose of this game, we don't think it's crucial to have very strong AI. Most people will be beginners, some people will have played before but can't quite remember how it works, and then there's going to be very few reasonable players and they get a good game with handicap stones. That was the philosophy." Indeed, the strong programs, MoGo and Zen, are based on years of work in tuning the parameters of the algorithms that drive them. "I'm certain that's necessary to create the world's best program, but I'm more interested in finding something that makes a leap in performance, a conceptual breakthrough, rather than taking the existing method and tuning all of the knobs."

Whether the potential of go AI is limited only to processing power is still unclear. At present, it's increasing by around two dan a year, but the AI is demanding double the number of simulations to get a constant increase in playing strength. Going beyond current processing limits, Graepel and other researchers can't say if performance will plateau or continue rising.

In the meantime, the techniques have clear applications in game AI outside of go. *The Path Of Go*'s configuration matching is fundamentally about learning from expert play and applying it to an AI agent acting in a world, but it's difficult to implement in continuous action games. "In a racing game, where the steering angle or the degree to which you've pressed down on the accelerator is a continuous variable, we'd have to think differently," Graepel says. The simulation system is easily applicable to, say, the RTS genre, though: "Even using random moves, it could give the computer some idea of what your current position is and the best thing to do."

The interesting point is that this attempt to emulate human intuition has resulted in a system of table lookups, random simulations and mimicking human behaviour that appears anything but. "Whether you can call it intelligence or not is unclear. There was this thought that go would be an example where really intelligent algorithms would be needed," says Graepel. "But now the fact that Monte-Carlo seems to scale so well with processing power might indicate that we've found a brute-force approach to conquer that problem as well. So I have mixed feelings about it, if you see what I mean! But it's certainly a beautiful class of algorithms."



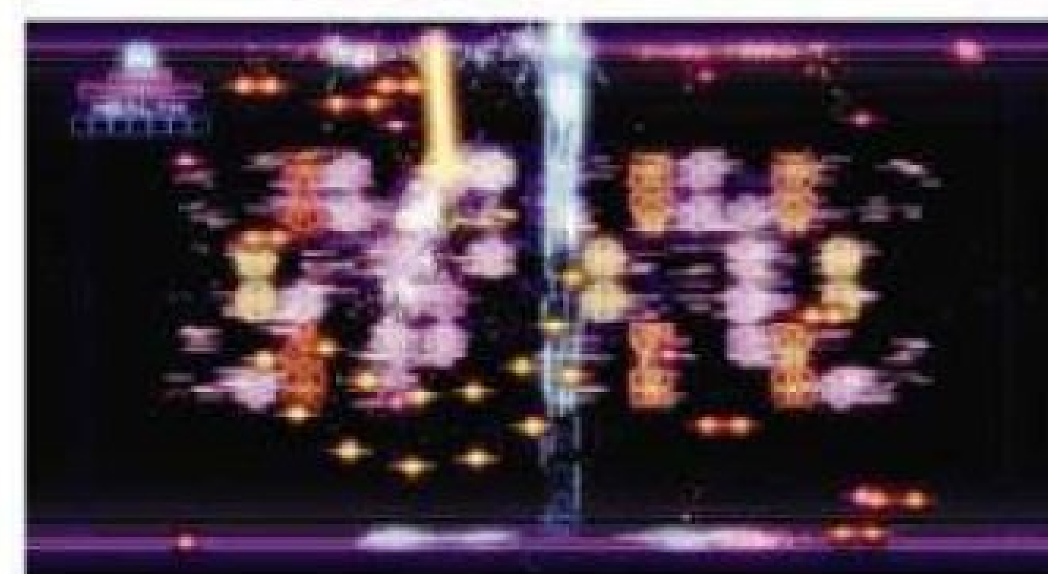
Newswire



Tennis for 2011

One of the world's first videogames, *Tennis For Two*, is being restored to its original glory at New York City's Brookhaven National Laboratory. For its debut in 1958 the game was made with cutting-edge tech: a vacuum tube analogue computer and a five-inch oscilloscope screen. The game's creator, Willy Higinbotham, didn't patent *Tennis For Two*, and it was dismantled a year later. Engineers are aiming to directly reconstruct the original, part for part, with a Donner Model 3400 computer almost identical to the Model 30 originally used.





DEVELOPMENT

Living off Live

The shift from studio salaryman to indie developer in a modern console world, according to one man who's made the transition

Over half a year has passed since Radiangames released its first title, *JoyJoy*, on Xbox Live Indie Games (XBLIG), and founder **Luke Schneider** hasn't yet turned a profit. But he's really rather upbeat about it.

"In September, I almost made money," he says brightly. "October, I was a little further off, but not too far off. November will probably be about the same – and [in] December I think I'll make money, but I'm not sure."

"Spending a lot of time talking to publishers hasn't worked out very well for me so far – I'm not a sales guy in any sense. That's why I like the Indie Games stuff"

Now with five of the finest games on Indie Games Marketplace, he's managed to average $50 a day. Each game sells for 69p and Microsoft takes about a third. It sounds like unrewarding work for a developer with Schneider's CV – a veteran of 13 years, he cut his teeth on *Descent 3* at Outrage Games before moving to Volition, eventually becoming the technical designer on *Red Faction: Guerrilla* – but he seems quite content with the way things are progressing. Temporary poverty, it seems, is a small price to pay for total autonomy.

"I knew that the monetary possibilities weren't that high on XBLIG," he says. "But I still wanted to make lots of console games without having to do an approval process. This is pretty much the only way you can do that. Spending a lot of time talking to publishers hasn't worked out very well for me so far – I'm not a sales guy in any sense. That's why I like the Indie Games stuff – there's no one to talk to! I just put stuff out and it gets approved really fast, and then I see how it sells. If it sells OK, I keep going and eventually it adds up."

Another part of the problem when dealing with publishers is the scale of the projects he's able to create: the economy of XBLIG enforces a quick development turnaround, and this doesn't lend itself to creating a portfolio of games that might convince the moneymen.

"I tried to submit *Fluid* through the whole XBLA system," he says. "Microsoft said it looked like a good mobile game, but weren't interested in it for Arcade. Which I understand – the scale of the game I submit there needs to be larger, but it'd take me two months to build a prototype that I think would get their attention. That's a long time for me right now. All my games are small, pretty contained. They're not something you could expand into a huge game. *Inferno* is probably the only one; the others are close to their maximum potential – you couldn't turn them into a five- or ten-dollar game."



"Technically, Microsoft supports us pretty well," says Schneider (above). "In terms of giving us avenues to make the games more successful? I think they're still working on that! Microsoft could incubate those indie devs doing well and promote them to the next level – it'd be nice to have that avenue a little more open"

Schneider's five games released at the time of writing – *JoyJoy*, *Crossfire*, *Inferno*, *Fluid* and *Fireball*; prefixed by the name Radiangames if you're looking for them on Marketplace – each riff on old standards. That's hardly an unusual approach among indie developers, but Schneider's recombination of their principles is invariably slick and smart. *JoyJoy* is the most conservative – a twin-stick shooter of obvious *Geometry Wars* providence – but the others are more hybrid. *Crossfire* does eye-watering things with the *Space Invaders* paradigm, *Fluid* turns *Pac-Man* into speed-run score attack, and *Fireball* takes *Geometry Wars 2*'s Pacifism mode and runs with it. *Inferno*, meanwhile, recalls *Gauntlet* to create an elegant and compact exploratory shooter that, given its sparing design, is hard to fault. It's his fastest seller so far, and has the best conversion rate from demo to purchase, with its overall sales likely to eclipse *JoyJoy*'s by the end of the year.

"Maybe it's a little bit easier to enjoy *Inferno* than my other games," says Schneider. "You don't have to play your best to enjoy it. I'm going to explore if that can be expanded to *Crossfire*'s sequel, so it's more about progression, and upgrades, and getting further in the game,



Schneider's games (like *Inferno*, above) look little like anything else on Live. "It's actually fairly simple," he claims. "I don't paint bitmaps directly. I mostly use white bitmaps that have the alpha channel painted, so I colour everything in code and then do a lot of layering on top. It allows me to change colour easily"

With *Crossfire 2* (above), Schneider hopes to blend in *Inferno*'s upgrade system, creating a more meaningful structure. "I'm also going to use scoreboards for a separate mode," he says. "There'll be more weapons and upgrades, larger enemies and a whole progression system. You'll be able to save your progress, too"

and feeling good about that rather than just measuring yourself against a score."

The first *Crossfire*, meanwhile, hasn't fared too well: originally released for 240 Microsoft Points (about £2), it meant that Schneider quickly got a lesson in the frugality of the customers who frequent the Indie Games marketplace.

"I ended up that dropping that back to 80 Microsoft Points [69p] after three months," he says. "The amount of momentum that the game carried was small; overall, the revenue per download was higher, but the downloads dropped off a lot faster. Part of it's because of the ratings – if you're not in the top 20 ratings, you don't get any downloads. Or it used to be that way; now everything's a little bit more spread out – the top games are getting fewer downloads, but more games are getting downloaded overall."

Schneider's diplomatic about Microsoft's involvement with the Indie Games' community, acknowledging that the highly varied quality of games on the Indie Games marketplace makes it difficult for the company to promote it on 360's dashboard. Nonetheless, the outcry over the recent update to the frontend, which demoted the Indie Games marketplace to another sub-tier of menus, has renewed Microsoft's dialogue with indie developers. For his part, Schneider would like to see Microsoft nurture more keenly the bright lights of the Indie Games Marketplace, and ease their way to bigger developments. After all, he points out, indie devs are also behind some of Arcade's biggest hits. Schneider says that the first step is to break the race-to-the-bottom price war, which has set consumer expectations low at a maximum of 80 Microsoft Points.

"A second tier might help to make higher-priced games more appealing to people," he says. "If five- and ten-dollar games could have Achievements for indie games, and one- and two-dollar games couldn't, that'd probably help."

Although the introduction of Achievements would probably necessitate rigid regulation of the kind that Schneider has tried to escape, it's true that the Marketplace as it stands doesn't have an economy capable of sustaining larger developments. Although he'd like to work on slightly larger projects eventually, Schneider's immediate ambitions are to finish *Crossfire 2* and *Inferno 2* – and preferably soon. He has no specific plans to jump platform after that, although he's open to developing for other consoles. Setting up payment systems for PC seems too much of a hassle, and mobile development is also unlikely, for which he blames his big, unwieldy hands. In short, it looks like XBLIG will get to keep Radiangames for the immediate future.

"It's getting close to where I can sustain my lifestyle," sums up Schneider. "I've got a family and a house and stuff. It's not like I spend huge amounts of money, but I'm just trying to get to about 60 per cent of what I was making at Volition. If I have ten games on the marketplace, I'll probably make money."



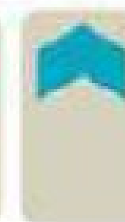


WEBSITE OF THE MONTH

A videogame music archive, maintained by an active and dedicated fan community, VGMdb is accessible and vital for the videogame music connoisseur who can't get the theme from *Nights* out of their head.

VGMdb mimics its movie equivalent in all the best ways. Artists and composers are searchable and voted for, with their individual pages acting as gateways to dig a little deeper into their work. Thanks to the site's commitment to 'the music of visual arts and games', you'll often wander into original manga soundtracks as you weave your way through videogame history and find a few crossover points with your favourite composers.

Site:
VGMdb
URL:
www.vgmdb.net






INTERVIEW


As in the 1986 original, the new game's huge bosses are gloriously mechanised versions of aquatic life


Another Chronicle runs on a version of Taito's Type X² board, the PC-based system that also powers the likes of Capcom's *Street Fighter IV*

Fit to Burst

Warning! A huge arcade cabinet is approaching fast

Darius' 1986 arcade debut was unique for offering three screens of side-scrolling shooter action, and for its forthcoming revival, *Darius Burst: Another Chronicle*, Taito is bringing out the big guns again with a dual-screen HD setup catering to fourplayer co-op play.

We catch up with deputy general manager **Hitoshi Kunisawa** (above left) and producer **Makoto Harigaya** (above right) to get the lowdown on high-end cabinets and giving veteran fans something to get excited about.

How did the *Darius* revival come to life?
Makoto Harigaya: We first decided on a target audience. We were interested in the male audience that used to enjoy arcades in the past. They're now in their 30s and 40s and aren't going to arcades as much any more. We wanted to give them a reason to come back. Then, we got on to the question of which game would make them return. *Darius* quickly appeared as the one title that defined that generation in the arcade. We're unleashing a game that comes with a specific cabinet in order to revive arcade gaming.
Hitoshi Kunisawa: We had a couple of key priorities. One was to get new users on board. The problem was that these are users who aren't interested in core gaming, but in things that hardly qualify as pure arcade games. They're easily scared by the apparent complexity of today's arcade games. We want to deliver an experience that won't act like a wall at first contact. The second priority was to appeal to those who enjoyed playing games in arcades long ago. Because we had a plan and structure for the project, we got approval on our first submission to the management team.



What about the scale of the cabinet you had in mind? Didn't that raise eyebrows?
MH: You have to remember the franchise arcade history. You had *Darius I* and *II* released in the arcade with their own special multi-screen cabinet. Then *Darius-G* and *Gaiden* came along with a single-screen setup. If we based our project on the later formula, it would never have been accepted. We needed to bring an arcade experience, not something that could be reproduced in the consumer world.

How does *Another Chronicle* relate to the PSP *Darius Burst* that was released while you were working on the coin-op?
MH: We came up with the idea of putting two 30inch HD widescreen displays side by side for a single display. The PSP game obviously had only one. Having two forced us to redo a lot, almost from scratch. At the very start of the project, we were looking for anything we could reuse from the portable version, but we quickly realised that we had a very different game on our hands. It wasn't just about super-sizing things but rethinking the game's balance. Another big aspect is the fourplayer mode – the PSP was limited to singleplayer. We wanted the new *Darius* to integrate features that characterise the franchise in the arcade. You have a super woofer in the seat that reacts to actions on screen, for example. We call it the Body Sonic Seat.

> **"We were interested in the male audience that used to enjoy arcades in the past. They're now in their 30s and 40s and we wanted to give them a reason to come back"**

HK: The game may feel a bit shorter than older *Darius* games, but gaming has evolved and it is not all about duration and play time, but when and how you play games. The success of social network systems is one aspect, iPhones are another.

Do you plan to reuse the cabinet for other games in the future?
HK: Our main focus shouldn't be to focus on revivals or a specific cabinet, but on finding ideas that aren't only appropriate for their time but also have a positive effect on arcades. So we'll need to think about it. 



With a pair of 30inch HD panels joined horizontally and fourplayer support, *Another Chronicle* is unlike any other arcade cabinet

Continue

A bright new year
We've seen some stuff. It's looking… *interesting*

Levelling up
Cataclysm, *Infinity Blade*, even *GT5*. Traaans-*mute*!

T-t-t-temperature drop
Huddled up is the only way to play *Dead Space 2*

Quit

The Oddboxx
Stranger's Wrath? PC users' wrath, more like

Creaking broadband
A 7.7GB *WOW* update? Mmm. Wish us luck

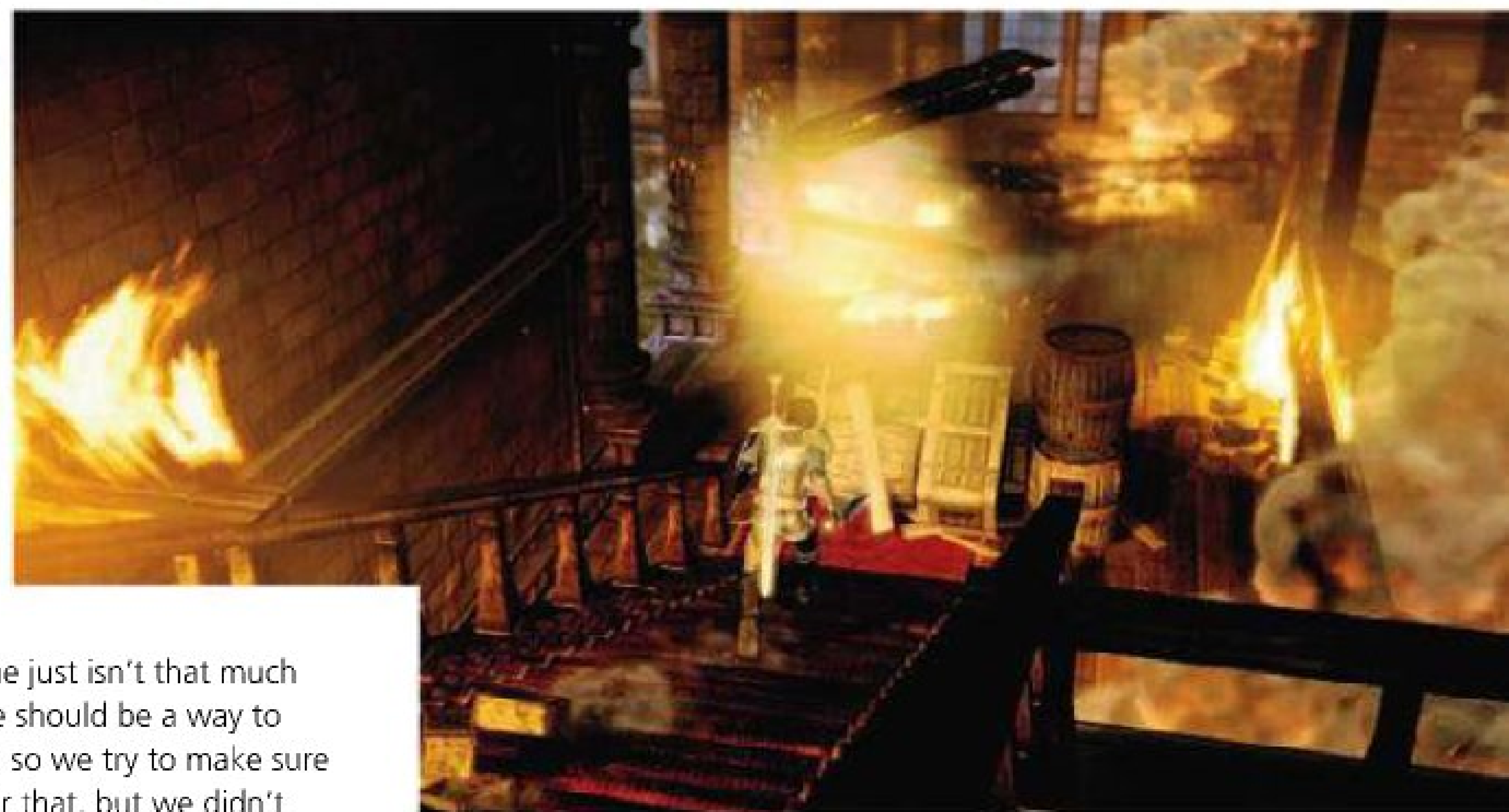
Today's video reveals
"If it's not realtime, it's not a game." Remember that?



INTERVIEW

Siege mentality

Obsidian talks cameras, console players and following in Chris Taylor's footsteps with Dungeon Siege III





Gas Powered Games' original *Dungeon Siege* was released in 2002; what's officially known as the third game (above) is due later this year. Alvin Nelson (left) and the team at Obsidian are the fourth group of developers to work on the fantasy RPG IP

With *New Vegas* behind it, Obsidian Entertainment is headed to the mythic past, taking custody of Gas Powered Games' *Dungeon Siege* franchise. With the third instalment in the action-RPG series taking shape (see p30), we sit down with assistant producer **Alvin Nelson** to find out how the game's being made with two different audiences in mind.

Obsidian seems to be the method actor of game developers, having covered for BioWare, Bethesda and now Gas Powered Games. How do you get in character?
We play all the games that those developers made, for a start. We try not to emulate different developers, but this is just the way it ends up happening. Working on a follow-up to a BioWare game, chances are it's going to be pretty similar, and the same goes for *Fallout* and *Dungeon Siege*. That said, we always try to add our own style as well. We try to really focus on engaging stories and we try to create new systems, too. So with *Dungeon Siege III* it's about creating a more engaging story for the licence, and bringing the series to consoles.

> **"We didn't want to lessen the game for the hardcore and we didn't want to dumb it down for the casuals. I think we're somewhere in between"**

***Dungeon Siege III* seems balanced to encourage two very different playing styles – you've got loot and side-quests for those who want them, but you've also got the breadcrumb trail that allows casual players to get through the game quickly. How did that come about?**
Again, we wanted to make a great story, but then we also understand that console players aren't perhaps as engaged in story as PC gamers are. Add multiplayer to that, too, and sitting in a long conversation for a long time just isn't that much fun for some people. There should be a way to continue the game quickly, so we try to make sure there's always an option for that, but we didn't want to lessen the game for the hardcore and we didn't want to dumb it down for the casuals. I think we're somewhere in between.

Is pulling the camera in close another part of the same process?
Yes. Console players are possibly more used to games like *Mass Effect* and *Gears Of War*, where the camera's really close. We still needed to pull ours out a little bit more, but we wanted to give you the option to have that closeness – that slightly over-the-shoulder feel – alongside a second camera that's a little bit farther back.

Does a decision like that have big repercussions for the way you approach design?
Totally. You build the world around the camera, so when you have two different camera views to choose from it's much harder, because things that look good from one angle might not look good from another. It's a lot of extra work. There are game-flow things as well, as you have to spawn enemies in front a lot more, and it's harder to place secret areas, too, because you may not be looking in the right direction.

How does your relationship with *Dungeon Siege* creator Chris Taylor work?
All of our milestone builds get sent to Square Enix and to Chris – he gives a bit of feedback on story and gameplay. He's really good about what does and what doesn't feel like *Dungeon Siege*; he helps steer us. We've created a couple of enemies along the way that he thought weren't right for the game. He's also really good on the lore and how the characters are written. Even when we're creating new areas of the world, they have to fit in with the overall approach.



OUT THERE

SENTRY FUN

Thinking of skiving during a shift at Valve's headquarters? Think again. A replica of the level-one sentry gun from the developer's *Team Fortress 2* now sits and stares in its Washington base. Built by special effects company Weta Workshop, which has worked on everything from The Lord Of The Rings to District 9, it's as accurate as you could hope and as innocently sinister as you'd expect. How long it will last before someone sets an electro-sapper on it remains to be seen.

● tinyurl.com/wetavalve

INCOMING

Tomb Raider

FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3** PUBLISHER: **SQUARE ENIX**



Lara begins? Crystal Dynamics gets to tell its own origin story: the tale of Ms Croft's first shipwrecked survival mission. After the snack of *The Guardian Of Light*, we're ready for a main meal

Deus Ex: Human Revolution

FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3** PUBLISHER: **EIDOS**



Would you like to augment that purchase? Eidos is making pre-orders vital again with a bonus mission and extra weapons, but £60 for the special edition is the 2027 inflationary price, right?

Batman: Arkham City

FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3** PUBLISHER: **WARNER BROS**



Villain Hugo Strange punctuates *Arkham City*'s promo campaign with shadowy menace. His canonical penchant for entrapping Batman could provide a setup similar to that of *Arkham Asylum*

Journey

FORMAT: **PS3** PUBLISHER: **SCE**



It had us at "from the creators of *Flower*", but the moody score and mouthwatering pastel washes help, too. Looks like the perfect accompaniment to our diet of goblins and hot pursuits

The Ministry Of Silly Games

FORMAT: **PC** PUBLISHER: **ZATTIKKA**



Monty Python returns to the virtual world after more than a decade. Consultant and endorsee Terry Gilliam says the collection of social minigames "looks like what was inside my head"

Insane

FORMAT: **TBC** PUBLISHER: **THQ**



It's time for Guillermo Del Toro to back up his barks about games' potential for storytelling. Currently slated as a trilogy kicking off in 2013 and to be developed by *Red Faction* veteran Volition

Prototype 2

FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3** PUBLISHER: **ACTIVISION**



The trailer promises more slow-mo carnage and less brooding. The destruction Radical achieved in the original has yet to be matched – or attempted – by any other open-world smash 'em up

Retro City Rampage

FORMAT: **360, WII** PUBLISHER: **TBC**



Anyone up for "magnificent monophonic modulated sounds"? Brian Provinciano's ode to all things retro is coming screaming from the indie scene like a fond memory you haven't had yet

Metal Gear Arcade

FORMAT: **COIN-OP** PUBLISHER: **KONAMI**



A reworked *Metal Gear Online* with stereoscopic 3D and a cab you could live in. Our hunger for Japanese arcade games is strong (see p16), so the petition for its western release starts here

INTERNET GAME OF THE MONTH

One Chance

tinyurl.com/onechan

Playing out like a Choose Your Own Adventure story with an 8bit, apocalyptic twist, *One Chance* places you in the shoes of scientist John Pilgrim, six days before the world's end.

You patrol the screen left-to-right, selecting from choices of work or play and potentially deciding the fate of the universe. It's a tall tale in a humble shell and what's interesting is how such a simple construction can elicit such strong emotion from an unexpecting user. In the final few days you'll find yourself torn between the branches of family time and work. The player in you will search for a solution while the human in you will lean towards the more sentimental route. And when it's over, it's over – *One Chance* is just that: with its cookie in your system, there are no replays or avenues for seeing every ending. A genre like this, where multiple choice is the crux of the experience, is the perfect canvas to experiment with ironman rules, and developer Awkward Silence Games has made an engrossing, memorable attempt to ensure that its world ends with you.

15

MASS EFFECT 2

WINNER 2010 GOLDEN JOYSTICK AWARDS
ULTIMATE GAME OF THE YEAR

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FIGHT FOR THE LOST

Human colonies are disappearing. Your mission is to find out why and bring it to an end. You're not expected to survive, but that's never stopped you before. Assemble an unlikely team of criminals, warriors, and biotics to fight for the lost.

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The rolling out of trading in

Piers Harding-Rolls looks at developments in the ever-growing pre-owned market



The pre-owned games industry in the UK and US has come a long way in the last three years. Once solely the preserve of high-street specialists and indie games stores, it's now perhaps harder to find games retailers that don't offer a trade-in service for boxed games.

Most recently Amazon launched its own trade-in service from its UK site, having trialled a similar plan in the US since March 2009. Platforms covered include PS3, Xbox 360, Wii, PS2, DS and PSP – as well as a number of legacy and classic hardware stretching back to the Atari platforms of the 1980s – and also includes some accessories. The company offers free return postage to those that trade-in – users print off a pre-paid delivery label and packing slip, then put the game in the post. Amazon is one of a number of retailers to recently expand into games trade-in services in the UK, including supermarkets Tesco and Asda as well as entertainment specialist HMV, which has been operating its service successfully for over a year. Amazon's US trade-in service covers around 10,000 games, accessories and console hardware, which gives an indication of how it might grow in the UK.

Profits from pre-owned games are impressive. Game Group's pre-owned gross margins are around 40 per cent, while new games and hardware are around 20 per cent, so it is not surprising that retailers are looking to access this lucrative business. It's estimated that UK pre-owned sales in 2010 represent almost 15 per cent of a combined pre-owned and new-packaged games market at around $430m. But profits are only part of the picture. Amazon's move into pre-owned games is a reflection of the importance of providing a games trade-in service as part of a bigger strategy to engage specific customers and compete in the wider retailer landscape on the high street and online.

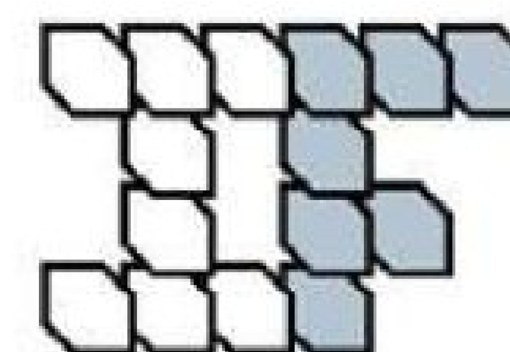
The move highlights that offering a trade-in service is now a legitimate competitive strategy for online-only retailers, as well as high-street chains, aided by well-established and cost-effective distribution capabilities. In late 2010, in the UK







Trading in *Black Ops* (left) at Game will earn you £25 in store credit, and *Fable III* (above) £15. In terms of hardware, a 120GB PS3 Slim is worth £190 credit to HMV, but only £150 to Game



screendigest
www.screendigest.com







At the time of going to press, Amazon.co.uk is offering £23 of credit for a traded-in *Formula 1 2010* on PS3 (above), while *Crackdown 2* (above right) on 360 will net you £8.23. The limited edition of *Medal Of Honor* (top right), meanwhile, is worth £23 on PS3 but only £20.49 on 360

and US specifically, not having a trade-in service for games is a competitive disadvantage for retailers because gamers and their spending power (not just for games but other items as well) are an important consumer group for a wide cross-section of retailers. Implementing strategies to ensure gamers visit and engage with your business regularly is vitally important to retailers such as Amazon.

Users have to wait to gain access to their credit, because games are sent through the post, then checked before accounts are credited – a slower process than trading in on the high street

For the consumer there appear pros and cons to adopting an online-only offering from a company such as Amazon. Positive factors include guaranteed trade-in prices as long as the game is returned within a certain timescale. We are aware of only one high-street store in the UK – CEX – that allows users to check online how much a trade-in is worth prior to visiting the store. Other high-street specialists, such as Game, either need a phone call or a visit to check trade-in value. Not having to visit a store to trade in a game is another advantage, but Amazon's solution still needs packing and a trip to the post box or office.

Another significant downside to Amazon's service is not being able to trade for cash, which is a key advantage of high-street services from Game Group, HMV and CEX. Amazon's strategy to keep credit within the company's business is limiting for those who want to trade directly for money, but for users seeking higher trade-in values for credit transactions will have access to the whole of Amazon's catalogue of products: a much wider offering than you'll be able to get from any of the specialist chains. Finally, Amazon's service, while having its own user advantages, results in users having to wait a few days to gain access to their credit, because games are sent through the post, then checked before accounts are credited – a considerably slower process than trading in on the high street, where cash and credit can be spent immediately.

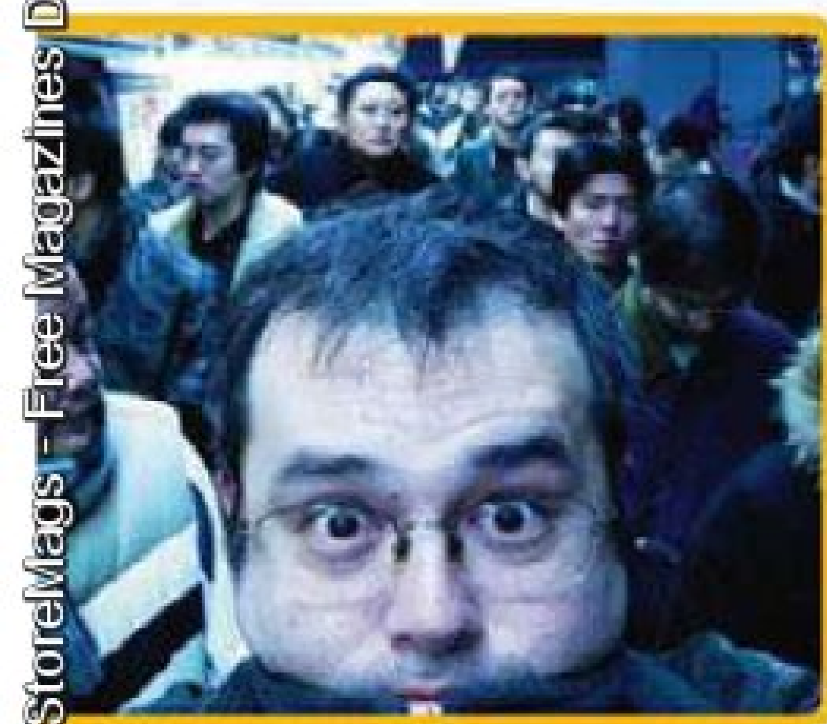
Interestingly, Amazon already offers a marketplace for selling used games to its shoppers, which is likely to lessen the impact of a trade-in service for the company, but illustrates the importance in offering a suite of services to engage different groups of consumers. Like Play's PlayTrade service, gamers can use Amazon's Marketplace to sell their games at a higher value than trade-ins. With both services on offer from Amazon, users will need to decide between guaranteed payments and ease of use, compared to often higher prices achieved through the Marketplace offset by cost of postage and time spent creating a listing and waiting for a purchase. 

SOMETHING ABOUT

Japan

Time to bring in the Japanese?

Christophe Kagotani says the west is taking one step forward and a barrel-roll back with its FPS fever



Here's a question that's been haunting me lately: Is it really true that Japanese developers are incapable of making a firstperson shooter?

Japanese developers look at the western market with envy: it's lucrative, and the native developers are reaping the rewards. When I ask them why they don't get into the mix and try to make, for example, an FPS, I'm told there's no point; the cultural difference is too much of a barrier. It's in westerners' DNA. It's ingrained in their cultural psyche.

"It can't be done," they say. "It doesn't make sense," they cry. "So-and-so tried and failed."

A deep-rooted factor in the hurdle facing Japanese developers is that they don't have the gun culture of the west. WWII was traumatic, obviously, and the current Defence Force is no Imperial Army but, as I love to say: "There's always a way." Making a shooter isn't about shoehorning an FPS perspective into a game and firing at targets as and when they pop up. It's about balance and skilled design/pacing. Take a look at the overflowing cemetery of failed shooters: it's testament to how few meet success. I think we're at a point, however, where Japanese developers' chances of breaking through are getting better – and I'll tell you why: western developers aren't making them like they used to.

Shooters are no longer about tension and survival – saving up those last few shotgun rounds for whatever is around the next dark corner. *Doom II*, *System Shock*, *Far Cry* – their time has been and gone. It's no longer just about the hunt. It's about the spectacle – more, more, more. The focus is on multiplayer.

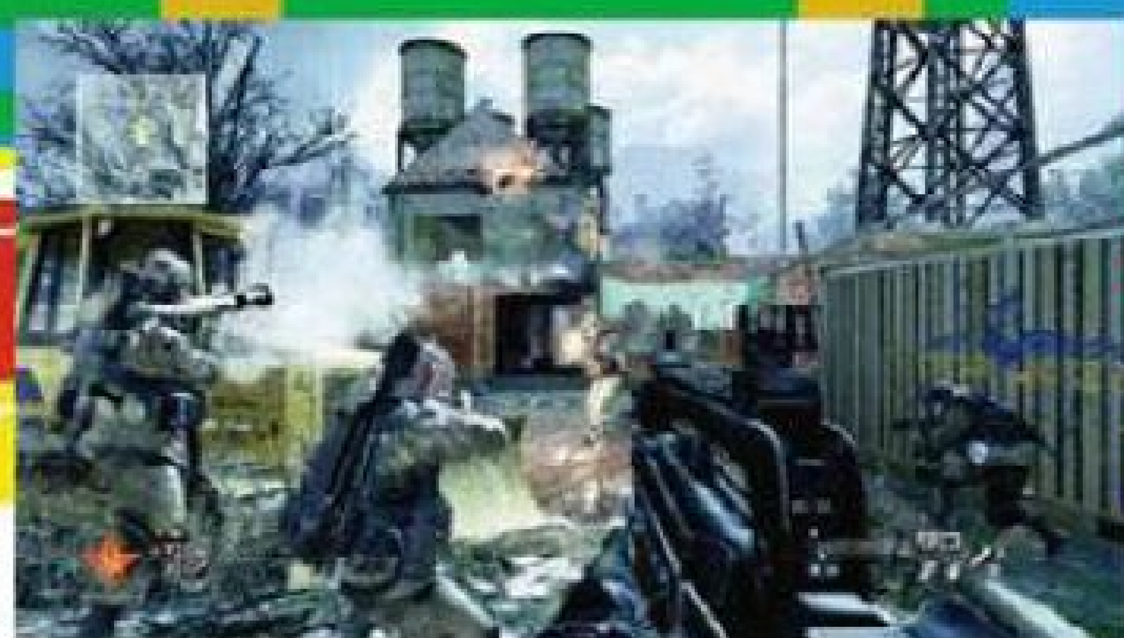
Firstperson shooters are no longer about tension and survival – saving up those last few shotgun rounds for whatever is around the next dark corner. Doom II, System Shock, Far Cry – their time has been and gone

In theory, making an FPS shouldn't be hard, but the new wave of games is redefining the mould with Hollywood thrills and cutscenes dotted all over the place. Gunfights are fast and intense. In terms of gameplay the FPS is inching closer to – can you believe it? – arcade lightgun games such as *Virtua Cop*; games the Japanese can do well.

Think about it. In *Modern Warfare 2* you have enemies popping up from the same pre-programmed positions. Windows swing open and gunfire rattles out at you. Another enemy rolls out of cover and takes aim. Bonus stages are even starting to spring up. I've seen this scenario a hundred times over in Japanese arcades, albeit with the player on rails. American shooter history is repeating Japanese arcade history.

So, basically, we have the experience and knowhow to make great shooters but we haven't even realised it. Japanese developers can do a great job of translating the fear and isolation of a gun battle, the sense of hunter and hunted. They even have the potential to pioneer the next







Those questions: how different are games such as *Vanquish* (above left) and *Bulletstorm*? What does *Call Of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* (above right) have in common with classic Japanese lightgun games? And why are modern FPSes so removed from genre pioneer *Doom* (right)?

wave of FPS games, combining the old-school tension with the new-school, arcade-style spectacle. I think we're almost there – when you get down to it, how different are action games such as *Vanquish* and *Bulletstorm*? Is it really too far to suggest we can make a firstperson shooter that will engage the west?

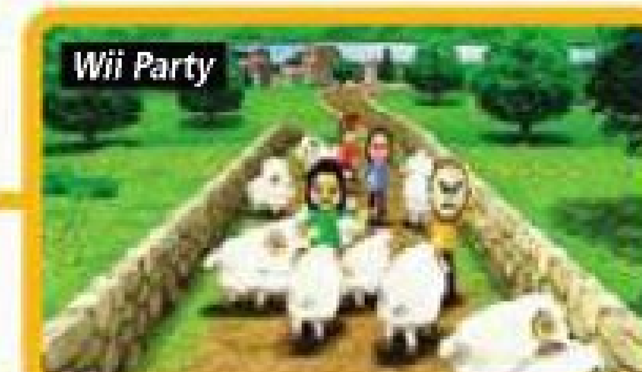
Strip away the physics, the cutting-edge technology, the crazy scenarios, and what you're often left with nowadays is a network-based shooter. Singleplayer campaigns are getting shorter and the focus is more and more on online play. Singleplayer is becoming peripheral to network modes, and isn't network mode itself just an extension of arcade co-op? It's about what you and your friends can achieve together. It's about how you overcome the opposition and rank up your squad.

All the developers I've spoken to in Japan are playing shooters online. They love them. Many started out in the days of *Quake Arena* and *Counter-Strike*, games that prove there needs to be a little bit more to it than simply running around and blasting each other away with big guns in cut-and-paste maps. Can the Japanese innovate in that respect, too, and bring something new to the party? Something that emphasises teamwork amid all the chaos? A game such as Sega's AM2 hit *Border Break* suggests they can. *Border Break* is an arcade mech game that pits two teams of ten robots against each other. It's played out over a network and at the end of each match players are awarded points to rank up their character. Sound familiar? Sega is already using the core elements of western shooters in its arcade games.

While the suits at the big companies are all looking west and scratching their heads, drooling over the potential profits, the current generation of young, upcoming designers, gamers and developers are already in the thick of it, on the brink of striking FPS gold.

Here's a question that doesn't worry me any more: is it really true that Japanese developers are incapable of making a good firstperson shooter game?





Mediacreate Japanese sales, December 13–19

Game/weekly sales/lifetime sales

1. ***Monster Hunter Portable 3rd*** (Capcom, PSP): 581,543 (3,161,801)
2. ***Gundam Musou 3*** (BNG-Koei, PS3): 185,908 (NE)
3. ***Inazuma Eleven 3*** (Level-5, DS): 175,604 (NE)
4. ***Donkey Kong Country Returns*** (Nintendo, Wii): 152,990 (316,300)
5. ***Pokémon Black & White*** (Pokémon Company, DS): 115,438 (4,744,211)
6. ***Shining Hearts*** (Sega, PSP): 106,733 (NE)
7. ***Wii Party*** (Nintendo, Wii): 87,114 (299,534)
8. ***Mario Sports Mix*** (Nintendo, Wii): 87,114 (299,534)
9. ***Ni No Kuni*** (Level-5 DS): 74,329 (244,877)
10. ***Mario VS Donkey Kong Totsugeki! Mini-Land*** (Nintendo, DS): 54,628 (163,929)

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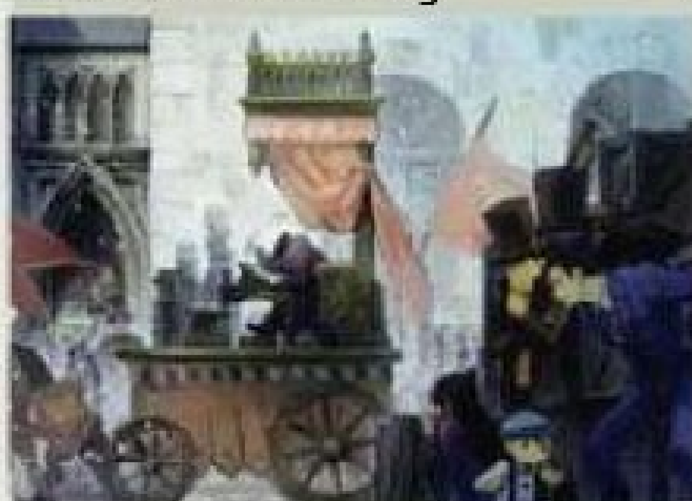
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3DS, LEVEL-5

The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim



Will Bethesda's updated engine do justice to the snow-capped peaks of Nord homeland Skyrim? Perhaps it'll be so stuffed with dragons that we won't even care.
360, PC, PS3, BETHESDA

Mass Effect 3



Earthier, grittier and greyer look like being the buzzwords for Commander Shepard's return (BioWare's game does feature dear old London, after all).
PC, PS3, 360, EA

Thy fearful symmetry

Should more games be bringing knives to gun fights?



The distinct nature of the roles both players are asked to inhabit in *SpyParty* allows a more complex scenario to emerge. Ironically, you'll be roleplaying a spy in Chris Hecker's game to a greater extent than the 'stay hidden to avoid getting shot' singleplayer games often demand

It's hard to imagine a sniper winning a game of *SpyParty* if they haven't played as the spy. Likewise, a spy who doesn't intimately understand the view their rival enjoys of the suspect-packed soiree is destined for failure. We've seen asymmetric multiplayer games before, but few require both players to be so very aware of the tactical options available to their opponent.

Symmetric multiplayer games aren't devoid of a psychological aspect, but giving players the same tools will often make the winner in a multiplayer match the one who's best at using them. Giving distinct abilities and objectives to each player, meanwhile, requires players to simultaneously be skilled at one role while understanding the other.

This allows developers to create situations distinct from those in singleplayer or traditional multiplayer games – it'll be some time before AI is advanced enough to make *SpyParty*'s feints and bluffs a natural strategy against a computer-controlled opponent. More importantly, embracing disparity between players, rather than trying to achieve balance, means players can inhabit roles more extremely defined than those in a typical deathmatch setting – an unarmed spy and a sniper with a single bullet, for example.

Despite the characterful animation which has brought them to life, and the unique movesets of each of them, the cast of *Marvel Vs Capcom 3* is less asymmetric than it appears at first – it has to be that way, or else kicking Hulk in the shins wouldn't get you very far. So long as players share an aim – in this case beating each other up – characters have to be equally fit for that purpose. It's giving players distinct objectives that truly frees up design.

It's interesting to note the way that firstperson shooters have embraced a degree of customisable asymmetry in their multiplayer modes – see *Call Of Duty*'s perk system, or *Reach*'s armour abilities. *Left 4 Dead*, meanwhile, has built an entire series around giving two sets of teams considerably distinct abilities and objectives.

Competitive and co-operative gaming might be more important than ever before, yet this aspect of design is under-explored. We've been spies versus spies for years – but things get more interesting when there's a counter-agent in the next room.











FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **SEGA**
DEVELOPER: **THE CREATIVE ASSEMBLY**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **MARCH 15**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E218**

Total War: Shogun 2

War can surely only be total in a world where everybody hates everybody else

Of all the historical periods that The Creative Assembly has covered in its strategy titles, it's *Shogun 2*'s that really deserves the prefix *Total War*. The game is set in Japan's Sengoku period, a chaotic century-and-a-half that saw family and clan clash across the country's four main islands. Japanese martial law during the period meant that much power was ceded to local leaders – daimyos – any one of whom could play his hand to potentially become one of the country's driving forces.

That egalitarian military opportunism makes for a uniquely flat playing field, where neighbours want to put your head on a plate and present it to their superior. The titular war is so total that there's little time to stop and smell the cherry blossom: new generals' provinces are invariably so close to aggressive forces that putting together a standing army is your first concern. The units you can requisition from a town depend on the buildings it possesses. That, in turn, depends on your progression down two technology trees: one focused on the art of war, the other on art itself. Both provide bonuses, yielding either advanced military units or production and wealth bonuses per season.



> **Shogun's battlefields are evocative arenas, full of little specks of humanity that elevate the playing beyond flat green squares. It makes scraps memorable**

few clans have insurmountable advantages. *Shogun 2*'s campaign map is – by geographic necessity – smaller and tighter than those of The Creative Assembly's recent, sprawling titles *Empire* and *Napoleon*. It's here that you plot your martial course: setting taxation rates, researching and purchasing structures, and pushing the massed ranks of your armies around a simplified map of the country.

Japan is a narrow place – made even more cramped when your immediate



Seasonal weather conditions affect battlefields. Engage your foe in a mountain pass in the height of winter and your troops will soon be glazed in a light dusting of snow; fight in summer and you'll be surrounded by greenery

Aligning attacks becomes a balancing act. Push too early into nearby cities and you could face much fancier samurai who are able to slice through your low-tech archers. Wait for the crack troops and you might be swamped by superior numbers. In the early game, attack distances are small: you can push for a next-door city and reach it in the same turn. But as your influence spreads you'll want to move along the country's spine, meaning attacks have to be planned.

Any military unit not contributing directly to your glorious rise is a burden on resources, thanks to an upkeep value that quickly drains your overall coffers.

It makes sense to use your troops in battle as regularly as possible, and not just from an economic standpoint. *Shogun*'s battlefields are evocative arenas, full of little specks of humanity that elevate the playing field beyond flat, green squares. It makes scraps memorable, and causes you to make your own legends. A tiny, ornate bridge forms the only river crossing in a wintry forest region, and the spectacle of eight companies of armour-plated men trudging across it is enough to make you pause the game and spin the camera around to get a better view.

The shift to a more easily contained time period than other recent *Total War* games has given the dev team mastery over their stylised visual theme, as well as a deeper, better-balanced tactical system. The interplay of cavalry and infantry, light and heavy, ranged and melee is honed: angle of attack, flank protection and unit formation all need to be considered. At times, in this early code, it feels like it's all a bit too much for the game's AI – suicidally hurling cavalry unit after cavalry unit against well-placed archers until it all of its forces have been spent. But in the same set of games, the computer wheeled its infantry expertly, engaging frontline missile troops from the safety of nearby woods, suggesting that any flaws require a dab of pre-release tweaking rather than foundation-level overhauling.

Armies sat outside city walls will restrict production and output; if your besieging



Armies and specialised units are represented by giant figures. Armies can only sustain so many fighting units, capping battles and preventing players from rolling a huge force together





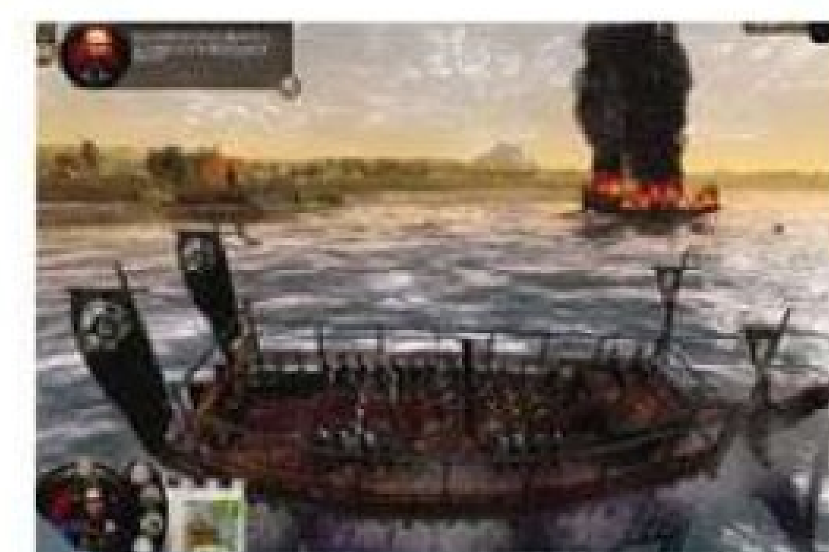


Houses and ramparts form defensible structures. Any units put inside them gain statistical bonuses. Taking them from an enemy involves careful army manoeuvres – even with a numerical bonus, hurling men at a fortified position is a surefire way to get them all killed

War at sea is about getting close to your opponents. With medium and large ships, arrows are preliminary softeners rather than the main event – there's nothing like *Empire*'s cannon broadsides







Beside the seaside

Japan's coast is in easy reach for most clans, making maritime travel and combat a necessity. Fights at sea are skirmishes in comparison with *Empire* and *Napoleon*'s naval engagements. In *Shogun 2*, boats act like troop carriers, the killing blow not delivered by cannonball or chainshot but by sidling up to an opposing vessel and boarding. The arrows your men do fire are more annoyance than potentially lethal strikes. Once your samurai have climbed aboard and sent the opposing sailors to the Japanese equivalent of Davy Jones' Locker, you get the chance to keep the boat and turn it to your flag, bolstering your own fighting force.

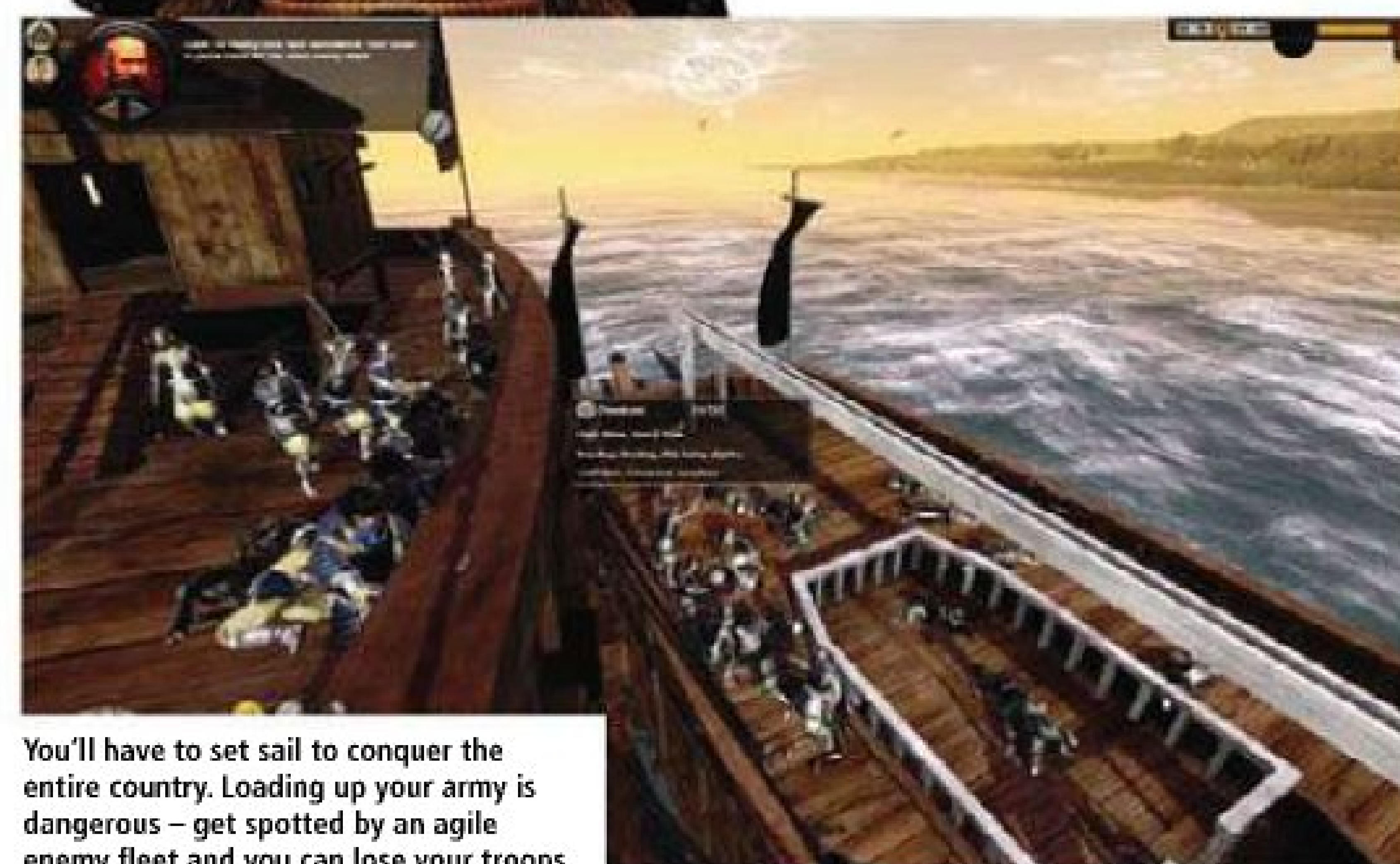


forces stick around long enough, they'll draw the enemy out to fight on the plains, losing them the benefit of fortification. If you're on the defensive, it pays to lure troops into your castle towns. Japanese castles are very different to their western counterparts. Tiered constructions, they incorporate wide-open spaces that seem counter-intuitive from a defensive standpoint. Instead of keeping rabbles out, they tease them in with expanses of open air – perfect for archers and matchlock musketmen to set up killing fields, before swift cavalry and heavily armoured samurai stream into the enemy's disorganised ranks and jab a katana in their exposed underbelly. *Shogun 2*'s siege defences have a subtlety that *Medieval* and *Empire*'s blunt force battering rams lacked. Holding off a siege is about cajoling and pretending, waiting for the right time to unsheathe the big swords and slice an attacking force's head from its body.

With some careful planning, you can achieve this decapitation more literally: kill an army's general, and it loses a morale-boosting lynchpin. Generals have a radius effect on troops, buffing their killing ability. Each bundle of men has a host of constantly wavering statistics attached to it in battle – attributes like 'confident' or 'concerned about exposed flank' that affect the behind-the-scenes maths. Assassinate a general and you'll see an instant dip in these across the board, making them priority targets for speedy or ranged troops.

Outside of battle, generals are still fair game. *Shogun 2* is one of the world's few games that can can legitimately field ninjas in a proper context, and it does so with glee. Each comes with its own 15 seconds of video, as well as a useful list of skills that make a general's job markedly easier. A ninja's sabotage ability applies to static structures – he can set fire to a city's door to allow easy access for the army stationed outside, or he can poison a wandering army's water supply. This second skill is devastating when used against an aggressor on your borders, forcing them to turn tail and restock on troops – perfect when you need to buy yourself some time to mass a force.

Shogun 2's predecessors sometimes felt lopsided. The Creative Assembly's new game already feels tighter and neater, and its AI – even with some gaps – is leaps ahead of the earlier, wonky machine logic. Your CPU foe puts up a good fight this time around, which glosses an already slick package.



You'll have to set sail to conquer the entire country. Loading up your army is dangerous – get spotted by an agile enemy fleet and you can lose your troops

FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **SQUARE ENIX**
DEVELOPER: **OBSIDIAN ENTERTAINMENT**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **2011**

Dungeon Siege III

Obsidian trades Geiger counters for greaves and prepares for a foray into the realms of high fantasy, but what magic will this game offer?



Chat roulette

Serving as a reminder of the developer's days spent following in the footsteps of BioWare, Obsidian's opting for a very familiar dialogue wheel when it comes to interacting with NPCs. While the time-pressure element that graced spy game *Alpha Protocol* has disappeared, the various conversational gambits that come up in the first hour or so of the game are enough to suggest a very light morality system might be ticking away behind the scenes. Equally, despite the hopefully placeholder transatlantic accents that come spilling out of the villagers and marauding witches who populate *Dungeon Siege III*'s early stages, there's reason to believe the studio's skills at crafting better-than-average characters has made the transition too.

As with any decent roleplaying game, *Dungeon Siege III*'s developers are keeping a keen eye on balance. This time, however, Obsidian isn't just tweaking cooldowns, fiddling with recharge rates, and making sure that every +1 mace has an equal and opposite heavy shield to counter it. Rather, as the action-RPG series goes multiplatform, the design team is trying to make sure the game offers immediacy as well as depth and intricacy. As such, the camera is pulled down out of the sky (one of the two available viewpoints offers something distinctly over-the-shoulder, while the other is chummily close and pitched forward), offering cut-to-the-chase dialogue options to circumvent lengthy NPC conversations, and threading encounters together via a shimmering breadcrumb trail that appears whenever you ask for it.

It's an approach that doesn't appear to be doing the series too much harm. Long since cast as the chameleon of the videogame world, with stand-in turns for the likes of BioWare and Bethesda, caretaker studio Obsidian is in fine mimetic form once more with *Dungeon Siege III*, offering a fast-paced and personable clutch of high fantasy standards delivered with appealing sincerity. And while the team's latest seems fine-tuned for maximum swordplay with minimal waiting, there are plenty of side-quests and dusty forest trails available and ready to tempt more exploratory players away from the central thread of the campaign.

Combat is punchy and immediate, with the game casting fresh enemies across your path every few steps, while a mixture of ranged and melee foes in most encounters suggests the whole thing's been put together with drop-in, drop-out co-op in mind. Early stages throw you into sleepy woods and villages to battle fairly generic brigands, but halfway through the first major campaign quest, magic dealers have entered the fray, teleporting in and out of reach, giving the action a welcome strategic edge and hinting that there's more to the fighting than hammering the standard attack button and intermittently tossing in a few specials.

> Obsidian's new Onyx engine may be solid and rather lacking in ostentation, but it provides some excellent lighting as bloomy afternoon slides into shadowy night

Talking of specials, each playable character comes with a range of action stances – in the case of melee-favouring Lucas, this translates to a speedy sword and shield combo, a heavier, slower, two-handed lunging stance, and a weighty block – and each stance allows you to unlock more powerful moves. You can then tweak these to your playing style by pouring on the proficiency points. Again, bearing in mind the game's approach to its audience, the upgrade menus are simplified enough to befriend those who would otherwise be daunted. The moves are entertaining, too. The Blade Dash, for instance, allows you to blast a path through foes with a single lunge of the sword, while a solid shield bash creates breathing room and can stun enemies for a few seconds.



Levelling up currently feels like a bit of a non-event, since it's little more than a wimpy flash of light that leaves you with a few upgrade points to play with. Still, equipment menus benefit from the same rather utilitarian approach to presentation, giving you a clear indication of the relative merits of each new piece of armour or weaponry and allowing even the densest adventurers to appreciate that almost all of the big-ticket items appear to have you balancing some interesting strengths and weaknesses. Elsewhere, while the gameworld's a familiar jumble of quest-riddled villages, bandit-clogged mountain paths and dank, glistening dungeons, the rusty, autumnal hues and ramshackle farmsteads have a certain earnest charisma to them, despite the absence of detailing. Obsidian's new Onyx engine may



Even the early villages promise to be stuffed full of mythical intrigue and side-quests if you're looking for them. There seems to be a fair amount of optional content for those who want to grind





The engine struggles with foliage but creates relatively likeable characters (even though the detailing lacks top-tier punch). There are many opportunities for chatting to NPCs, too









Moving the camera closer makes for some surprisingly dramatic combat by action-RPG standards. Particle effects are stylish, and the animation has a pleasing sense of connection

be solid and rather lacking in ostentation, but it provides some excellent lighting as bloomy afternoon slides into shadowy night.

While Obsidian's cooking up this likeably grindy lootfest in its new Irvine offices, it's hard to ignore the fact that, just across town, Blizzard's dark fantasy specialists are working with a canvas – and a budget – that allows them to be much more decadent and ambitious. Given *Diablo*'s hold over the action-RPG genre, then, it's probably wise for *Dungeon Siege III's* maker to pull in that camera and streamline those options. By picking its fights, the custodian of this venerable series is merely showing some of the pluck and savvy that every underdog needs in order to survive.







Special attacks blitz the screen with garish colours, overwhelming opponents with flurries of combos and insane feats of agility, but even the simple process of unleashing Captain America's shield proves satisfying



Marvel Vs Capcom 3: Fate Of Two Worlds

East meets west in Capcom's comic-book kaleidoscope of flailing fists and astounding superpowers

FORMAT: **360, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **CAPCOM**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **FEBRUARY**

Graduating from 2D sprites to the lush 3D of Capcom's MT Framework engine – previously harnessed by *Lost Planet 2* – *Marvel Vs Capcom 3* (*MVC*) is brighter, busier and bolder than its ancestor while retaining all of its accessibility.

The combat system is an extension of the previous game's, and while no major risks have been taken, the refreshed roster brings enough new styles to mix things up and keep thumbs thumping. Make no mistake: *MVC3* is a button basher's paradise, rewarding the slightest of combos with the slickest of visual flourishes. The ease of performing a screen-filling special attack may cause the hardcore to scoff, but there's a joyous simplicity here that shortcuts the often intimidating barrier to entry of the genre.

Tagging characters into the fray has always been the main gameplay variable of *MVC*, transforming a watered-down beat 'em up into a *Smash Bros*-style royal rumble of comic book carnage and providing a fail-safe for struggling amateurs. Aerial combos occasionally disorientate and the dense activity of the backgrounds can daze as much as dazzle, but it's a small price to pay to see the Incredible Hulk smashing around in an Umbrella laboratory.

The 50-50 split of franchise characters takes in both the mainstream (Chris Redfield, Dante, Spider-Man) and the fringe (Super-Skrull, MODOK), offering up some inspired combinations for your three-character team to battle across the game's wonderful backdrops. Seeing Amaterasu gnashing at Arthur, Albert Wesker gunning for Tony Stark, or Deadpool quipping his way to victory over a confused Ryu is the stuff crossover dreams are made of.

It would all be for nothing if the cast weren't suitably brought to life, and it's to the art team's credit that the opposing sides look fresh while honouring their heritage. Distilling the essence of two blockbuster brands is no mean feat, and one made even harder by an interim decade that has seen Capcom reintroduce its street fighters and Marvel get a Hollywood facelift thanks to a string of high-profile movies.

In a sign of Capcom's burgeoning interest in the western market, *MVC3* is brimming with comic-book iconography. Loading screens are now divided into panels, text screams across the screen in authentic fonts, and character models, as with *Tatsunoko Vs Capcom*, look like they've just leapt from the glossy pages of a graphic novel. A more appropriate title, perhaps, would have been *Marvel Featuring Capcom*.

The promise of a cohesive narrative tying together these two unlikely sets of mythology is unlikely to add any extra pulling power – this is a game for two people with restless thumbs who want the audio turned up to 11. Yet of all Capcom's efforts to leverage its IP in the west, *MVC3* may well be the most immediate, intense and invigorating of the lot.





The characters on offer in our preview – 28 of a proposed 40 – are varied and balanced. Smaller fighters such as Viewtiful Joe and Arthur make up for shortened range with speed. (And, yes, Arthur's boxers are here too)



Tagging in backup gets you out of many a scrape but when you call in big guns such as Thor or Hulk, the screen can be perilously obscured. Assembling the Avengers can be a bad idea when you want to keep track of the action



Merc with a special move

The best special attack in our preview build goes to Marvel's 'merc with a mouth', aka Deadpool, who literally breaks the fourth wall. Stringing together enough smooth moves to build up your power meter will allow the unhinged anti-hero to unleash all hell as he rips the health bar from the top of the screen and beats his foes to oblivion with it. It's one of many well-thought-out touches and gives us an appetite for the full roster when it arrives. Fingers crossed for Luke Cage and Danny Rand – or how about Phoenix Wright? We live in hope.

Swarm

It's Lemmings, but not as you know it, in Hothead's game of death



Stacking 'em high is the key to sneaking past some of the game's more threatening traps, such as minefields and whirling balls of fire. Trying to hop around safely in a stacked formation is another challenge altogether

FORMAT: **360, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **HOTHEAD GAMES**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **CANADA**
RELEASE: **Q1**



Swarm's style oozes charm: though the backgrounds are detailed and solid, it's the wonderful animations of the leaping, bounding, death-prone Swarmites that steal the show

Indie download games seem hell bent on remixing, splicing and subverting existing genres and proven ideas, often to spectacular effect.

Swarm's mandate is to carve up the crowd-control aspect of *Pikmin* and set it to boil over the structure of a traditional platformer. The aim is to ferry your posse of little blue minions to the end of each stage, satiating the 'Momma' overlord with high scores teased out by collecting orbs and committing stylish suicides. *Swarm* encourages you to slay your 'Swarmites' for point multipliers, but beware: if you kill all 50 of your crew, it's back to square one.

Staying alive is one of *Swarm*'s key tasks. Your herd moves and flows as a unified squad, expanded and contracted by use of the triggers, and harnessing the power of your team to dash, smash and leap the gauntlets laid out becomes natural and intuitive once you're in the rhythm of the game's simple control scheme. The use of face buttons is restricted, allowing your pressure on the triggers to convey the push/pull force you're effecting on the swarm.

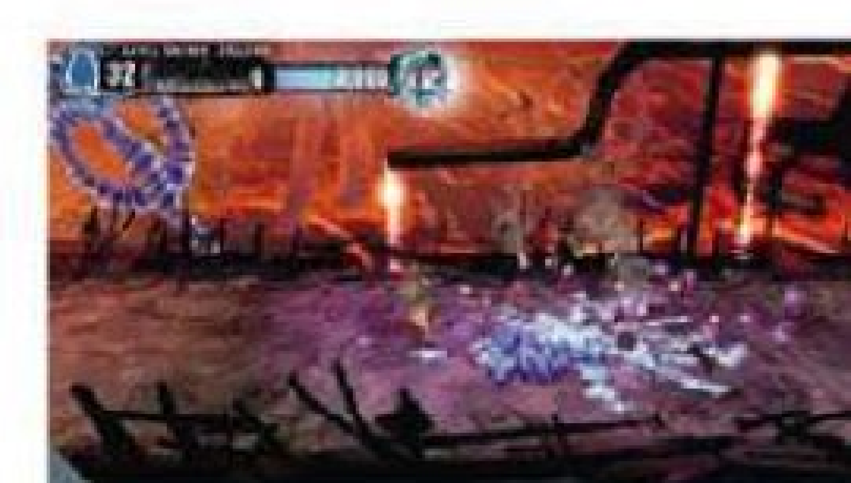
The other key task, killing your Swarmites, can be a trickier business. The unpredictable nature of some of the level-design traps – involving crumbling platforms, wind turbines and erratic villains – can play havoc with your premeditated attempts at self-sacrifice, wiping out your entire team in the blink of an eye. Respawn areas that replenish your numbers and checkpoints go some way to evening the scales of frustration and challenge, but the game can be especially punishing in its opening sections.

The isometric perspective gives the perfect vantage point for monitoring your squad and navigating obstacles, but in the initial stages, explosive containers that disperse and disorganise your team add an unwelcome element of randomness to proceedings, and the learning curve proves steep. Traversing a live minefield without prior knowledge of the advanced controls, for example, is a teeth-grinding opening trial by detonation.

As with Hothead's previous title, *DeathSpank*, *Swarm* has a bold, distinct and playful personality that paints over some of the minor gameplay cracks. Even without Ron Gilbert's sharp wit, the team proves itself capable of conjuring a world of strange creatures and weird science. Though the opening segment gives little backstory, there's an appealing world here painted in sounds and animations that recall the work of Oddworld Inhabitants.

Downloadable games have more freedom to be liberal with their designs and outlandish with their ideas, but it's a delicate balancing act ensuring your game transcends a market saturated with gimmickry to become worth a purchase. *Swarm*'s distinctive styling should help it survive the PSN/XBLA gauntlet.





Army of some

There's an emphasis on replaying levels to perfection to access the next round. There's also a wealth of 'Progressive Death Medals', which are granted for spectacular failures – impaling, frying and exploding your miniature heroes will earn you top marks (just remember to keep one alive for posterity). The ability to stack up your team head-to-toe leads to some comical disasters when you pit them against the revolving firewalls.



Certain sections throw up the option to interact with the environment. It usually involves mass destruction and always incurs mass suicide. Death as a way of life never had so much resonance as it does here









There will be familiar locations to explore such as Tristram, which has appeared in both *Diablo I* and *II*, though now it's known as New Tristram

Diablo III

Blizzard combines stat peddling with a dose of fantasy brutality



FORMAT: **MAC, PC**
PUBLISHER: **BLIZZARD**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **TBA**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E207**

The Arena calls

New to the *Diablo* series is the PvP Arena mode. Teams of the three enter the deathmatch zones, with the win going to the last team standing. Unlike *WOW*, where competitive play has its own rewards and balance challenges, the *Diablo III* team has chosen not to do those things in the competitive modes. It's there for fun, frolics and bragging rights.

It's understandable why that decision has been made. For starters, a game like *Diablo* is all about discovering effective builds, many of which will be significantly overpowered. That's part of the fun. To then create a cycle of tweaking, buffing and nerfing to bring the effectiveness of all classes to within touching distance would be pointless.

Six characters use the environment and varied abilities to whittle down each other's health bar. Barbarians launch themselves into the centre, wizards sit back and pepper with spells from afar, while witch doctors throw summoned zombies at their opponent. With no healers, matches are usually over in a minute.

Diablo III's approach to levelling up is different. In a hack'n'slash game, getting that extra number is usually a rewarding experience akin to hitting the jackpot in a fantasy fruit machine. It's meant to be a show of light and sound, fireworks and Pavlovian pleasure, the thrill that comes before assigning talent points and being able to hit zombies slightly harder. In *Diablo III*, however, it feels like a punch to the stomach.

The screen fills with yellow. There's a heavy bass thump, the screen sparkles and fizzes, and then there's an even greater thump. You have incrementally improved your abilities. Now pick yourself up off the floor, and continue fighting.

The fighting is the point. Ignore the art style and any '*WOW* with ponies' internet petitions: *Diablo III* is more violent than ever. It's still a pure hack'n'slash game, one that sees five character classes go delving into endless dungeons, searching for loot, treasure and experience points. It's still entirely a PC game – left click to move, right to attack, hit the number keys to splatter the baddies with special abilities. And it's still a game that's at its best online, played cooperatively in teams of four.



The world of Sanctuary is in full 3D, but Blizzard has used its proprietary engine to recreate the familiar isometric view of past entries in the series. A random level generator is also promised

But it's changed. A decent physics simulation leaves corpses flailing as they're sent flying across the room by a barbarian. A wizard's fireball sees limbs tossed down pits. And the demon hunter pings grenades off a wall into a waiting horde of rotting flesh things.

The mechanics, too, have been upgraded. The magic of *Diablo* is in the gap between the action and the statistics. It's a virtuous circle: increasing your stats, pushing your numbers into specific builds or skills, opens up more abilities, which you then strive to improve. Now, runes – a kind of catch-all customisation option – can be applied to your skill. There are five runes, and each offers broadly similar effects to every skill in the game, regardless of class. A Witch Doctor might be able to cast a plague of toads, but that plague of toads can be upgraded with fire runes (flaming toads), golden runes (more toads per cast) or an obsidian rune (one giant angry toad). The same runes could be used instead on the wizard's fireball (more fire, a poison edge to the fireball, maybe more balls, maybe one giant fireball), or a barbarian's charge (flaming charge… you get the idea). Each rune has its own levels, too, so do you pick a level-two fire rune or a level-three obsidian rune? It creates a dizzying line-up of options and terrifying depth.

But all those numerical twists are there for just one reason: to break open dungeons. The numbers fade to background noise as players delve past reanimated skeletons and flailing black-magic devotees. Because at that point, all that matters is the feel of sword/fireball/toads on monster flesh. Blizzard has a history of delivering in this area, and looks like it will continue to do so. 



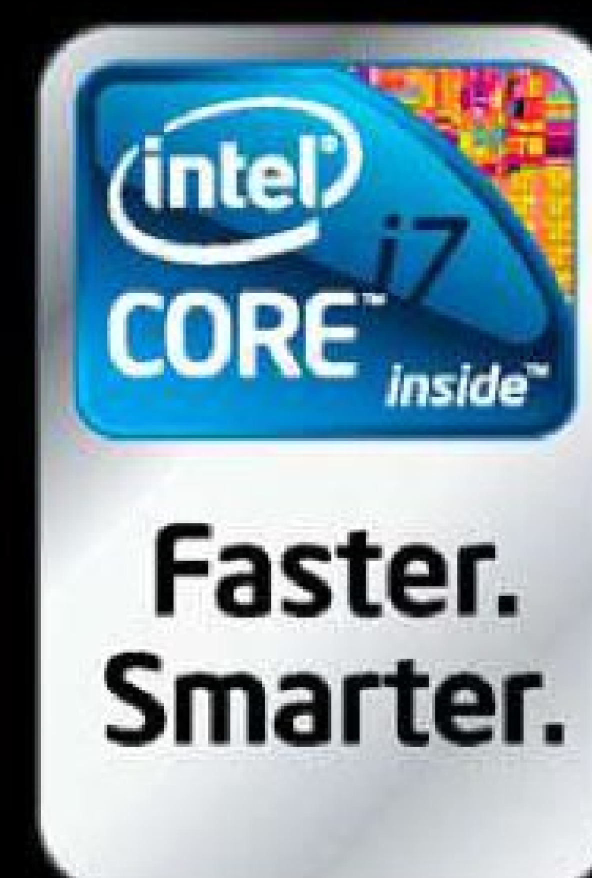


There are five classes in *Diablo III*, each one having its own distinctive set of abilities. You can chose to take on the role of a wizard, barbarian, witch doctor, monk or demon hunter


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HARDWAREHEAVEN
PERFORMANCE
AWARD




intel
CORE i7
inside
Faster.
Smarter.



The sniper can choose his zoom level, so while the spy can see his laser sight, he never knows how far from that his enemy's view extends



The sniper can mark out targets as being more or less suspicious with the left and right triggers respectively, which has the effect of brightening or darkening their character models to make the situation even clearer



There's even psychology to the spy's choice of character: statistically the man in the tartan jacket is the most popular choice, the James Bond-alike unsurprisingly the least

Spy Party

A twoplayer espionage game that is a battle of wits rather than skill

FORMAT: **TBA**
PUBLISHER: **TBA**
DEVELOPER: **CHRIS HECKER**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **TBA**

In a crowded room of 15 people, only one is being controlled by a human. Deduce who he is before he completes his objectives, and kill him with a single sniper rifle shot from across the street. That's half of it.

Slip a bug on to the ambassador. Retrieve the microfilm hidden in a book. Make contact with the double agent and say the passphrase. Switch the statue for a replica. All while a laser sight carefully scans the room, looking for the slightest hint of abnormal behaviour. That's the other half of *Spy Party* – at least this part of it.

This is Chris Hecker's asymmetrical twoplayer espionage game that he talked about in **E**223, and the party scenario is the only one seen or playable in this very early version. It will have others, and it's easy to see the potential these mechanics have for simulating all kinds of espionage operations.

The immediate reaction to the pitch is to pick a side and suggest that, at one skill level or another, it will always win. This was probably true at some stage of the game's development. But already, early enough to have only placeholder art, it feels remarkably balanced. That's hard to judge authoritatively, without seeing statistics, but importantly it feels fair. There's a simple test: ask any player if they'd like to play the other role next. The answer is always: "Sure."

Neither sniping a suspicious partygoer nor moving around the party as if you're computer-controlled takes much manual skill. Even once the spy has completed all his objectives, as a sniper you have eight seconds to line up a shot on your top suspect, and there's nowhere for him to hide.

Meanwhile the spy can see all of the triggers and hotspots for the game's AI, and only has to aim for a circle on the ground and press forwards to execute perfectly inconspicuous movement. Cleverly, the AI occasionally bumps into things and moves erratically, and it's remarkable how suspicious a sniper player can become of an entirely innocent automaton.

So *Spy Party* is pure psychology, a mind game more cerebral than gaming is accustomed to. When the sniper hears the passphrase uttered among the chatter, he presumes the spy is one of the people in conversation with the double agent. But the spy can also fake the passphrase, saying it to no one in particular, and use the diversion to perform the statue switch while the sniper scans the crowds.

Conversely, the sniper can use the laser sight alone as a weapon. When the spy's time to complete his objectives is running low, keeping your sights trained on your top suspect answers a lot of questions. If they're a human, they know you're watching and can't complete their final objective without giving themselves away. If they're AI, you'll soon hear the 'objectives complete' warning and know your second suspect is almost certainly your man.

Rather than either role collapsing into uselessness at higher skill levels, these mind games only deepen: anything 'only the AI would do' becomes a perfect feint, and any feint eventually becomes suspicious again.

While it's easy to see that the other scenarios will be interesting, it's testament to the cleverness of the first that it's hard to think of a specific setup that would work as well. Whether that becomes its curse, or makes this just a small taste of an even more extraordinary game, won't be clear until further details emerge.





The entire game is one small room at the moment, but it's novel and rich enough that its scope doesn't make it feel limited. Developer Hecker says that all art is currently placeholder



Time games

The spy currently has three-and-a-half minutes to complete his objectives. Both players see the time remaining, and the sniper knows the spy will be getting more desperate as it approaches zero.

The spy starts under AI control, and can leave his character on autopilot for as long as he dares: he'll be undetectable, but not get anything done. Once playing, he can extend his time limit by going to the window and looking at his watch. An obvious tell, but the sniper has to watch the windows and the clock to be sure it's not just an AI curious about the time.

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EA

VISCERAL GAMES

FORMAT: **IPHONE, PS3, PSP**
PUBLISHER: **SYSTEM 3**
DEVELOPER: **BROADSWORD**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **TBA**

Putty Squad

Digital distribution gives the Amiga classic-that-never-was a second chance



Forget suggestions that download services such as PSN have led to a 2D platform game renaissance – they still don't make 'em like they used to. And for many, that's probably a good thing. Today's platformers are leisurely obstacle courses compared to the enemy-packed death gauntlets of yesteryear – as *Putty Squad* is aptly placed to demonstrate. Though it received enthusiastic reviews from the gaming press of 1994, the original Amiga incarnation of the *Putty* sequel never made it to store shelves (though a SNES version did emerge). Broadsword's HD conversion is of the original code, and preserves all of the game's challenges and idiosyncrasies.

The *Putty* series features a stylistic mish-mash that has never quite been replicated. This is a world in which Aztec ruins are populated by giant frogs, bipedal cats and sausages speared on forks, the latter of which rise from the ground to damage your small blue blob of a protagonist. At times, platforms can be so packed with these pitfalls and hazards that it's hard not to feel overwhelmed. Thankfully, Putty's as flexible a character as you might expect – a stretch move lets him grab items otherwise out of reach, and he's also capable of flattening himself into a enemy-immune pancake with a tap of down on the D-pad. The various applications of Putty's many skills aren't immediately obvious – the game's content to let you find out for yourself, for instance, that Putty's ability to inflate can let him float across gaps or make him explode – killing all the enemies on screen at the cost of some health.

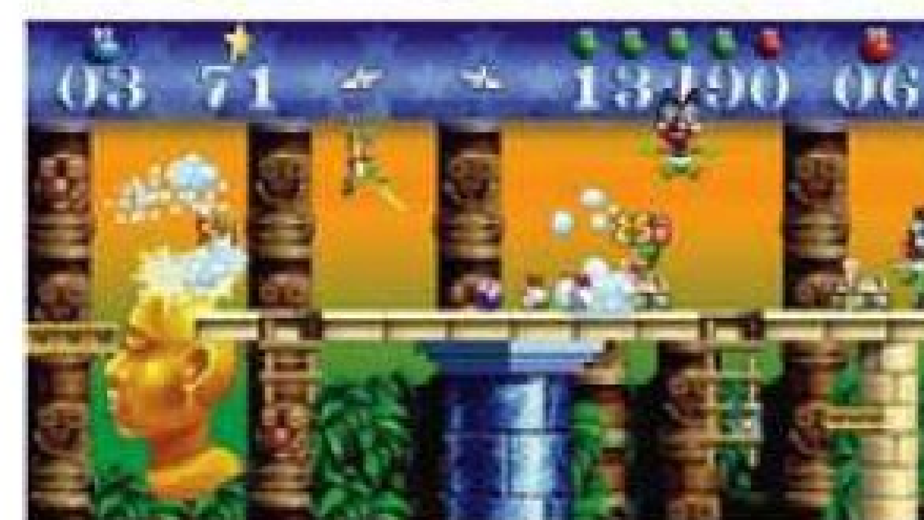
Putty Squad's age may show in the arbitrary difficulty and lack of handholding, but its experimentation-encouraging approach should strike a chord with contemporary audiences, as well as Amiga owners, who will finally be able to see if the 17-year-old reviews got it right.





The Palace Of Baghdad level sees Putty attacked by bombs and paratroopers. Ah, the 1990s







Living blobs of putty snack on steaks and burgers, apparently. Putty can 'absorb' items such as spring pads before spitting them out at more useful locations

Dr Kawashima's Body And Brain Exercises

Feeling lazy and uncoordinated? The doctor will see you now, with a little help from Kinect

FORMAT: **360**
PUBLISHER: **NAMCO BANDAI**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **FEBRUARY 11**



A large proportion of the games are co-ordination challenges that require you to think about the placement of your limbs. It's an effective use of the sensor

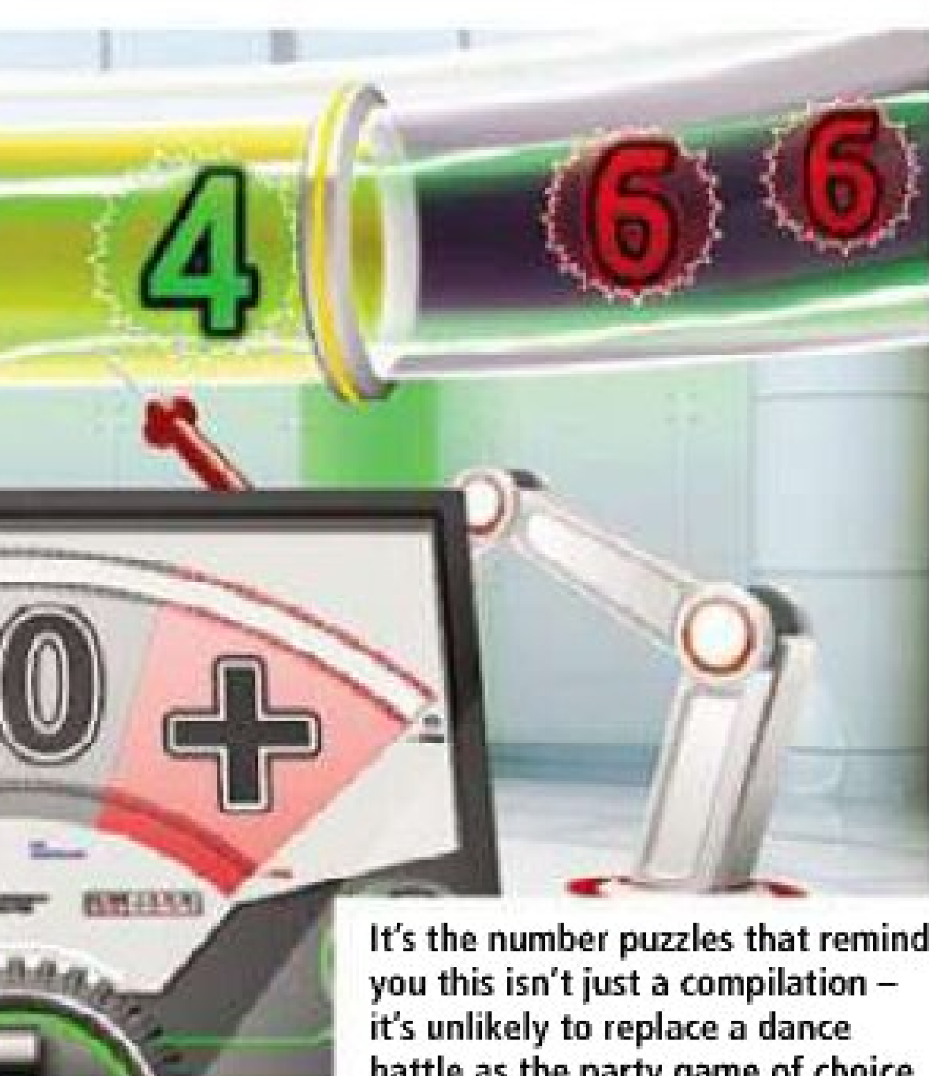
If you need any proof that Kinect can do wonders for your physical appearance, look no further than Dr Kawashima, who seems to have sloughed off 30 years during the transition from DS to 360. Gone is the slightly chunky, angular floating head of *Brain Training*, replaced by a svelte, fresh-faced avatar. It's all the more impressive when you consider the fact that publisher Namco Bandai is holding back from describing *Body And Brain Exercises* as an out-and-out fitness game, instead describing the benefits of its Kinect title's puzzly exercises in slightly ambiguous terms relating to well-being and co-ordination.

The game's blending of mental and physical challenges is best demonstrated by a game that sees you solving simple (at least to begin with) maths equations, kicking a ball to your right or left in order to specify the correct answer. The disconnect between mental arithmetic and penalty shootouts is enough that we did find our feet getting ahead of our brains on occasion, but the feeling that this was *Brain Training* with added kicking was a difficult one to shake off.

Some challenges require you to think about your body's position in a more creative way – one game turns your arms into the hands of a clock, before asking you to convert digital times to analogue by gesturing appropriately. It's challenges such as this which best use Kinect to provide co-ordination exercises distinct from the purely mental gymnastics of *Body And Brain Exercises*' forebears, and which the full game will hopefully explore even further.

A multiplayer mode sees *Body And Brain Exercises* make a concerted effort to double up as party game – though whether or not the opportunity to be rated by Dr Kawashima as smarter than your friends will make up for the slightly sterile feel is uncertain. Even if not, *Body And Brain Exercises*' blend of gentle encouragement and compulsive score improving should nonetheless ensure it captures the appeal of the doctor's DS-based chart toppers.





It's the number puzzles that remind you this isn't just a compilation – it's unlikely to replace a dance battle as the party game of choice

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FORMAT: **360**
PUBLISHER: **G.REV**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
COUNTRY OF ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **TBA**

Seiso Koki Strania

After flirting with real arcades, G.rev settles on a virtual one for its latest shooter



Seiso Koki Strania marks a departure for the coders at G.rev, who are usually nowhere more at home than on an arcade board. The studio's latest shooter, which made teasing appearances in the form of location tests in Japanese arcades before disappearing late last year, has re-emerged as its first console-exclusive title.



The game is presented in widescreen but only a 4:3 slice down the centre is playable, which suits its vertical-scrolling nature

Which isn't to suggest that G.rev has stopped doing what it does best. *Strania* might be a furious lightshow, but it's a fairly traditional shooter: players guide a mech across six vertically scrolling levels packed with oncoming enemies. The twist is that your mech can hold a different weapon in each of its two arms while keeping a third in reserve, cycling between the three. New weapons are available to be picked up during the levels, in which case they'll replace one currently equipped. In a tidy piece of interface design, a dotted line arcs and curves towards whichever of the weapons your mech is currently holding that the new power-up will replace.

While most of the weapons seen so far are a predictable assortment of projectiles and lasers, more often than not you'll be holding a beam sword in at least one of your hands – useful during the hemmed-in passages which levels occasionally funnel you down. Your tactical options will depend on the weapons you're holding at a given time – it's possible to turn the game into a scrolling slasher with twin swords, for instance – and



Certain weapons are effective against particular enemies, so weapon switching will be a big part of the game. An overdose gauge fills as you kill enemies, leading to invincibility and score multipliers. Expect online leaderboards and co-op play both online and off

unique special attacks can be activated by using both weapons at once. It's not the most genre-shattering of mechanics, but at the very least suggests that *Strania*'s levels will offer more than just the opportunity to perfect scores over repeat attempts. G.rev's home may be inside an upright cabinet, but Live Arcade appears a more than satisfactory substitute.



FORMAT: **360, PS3, WII**
PUBLISHER: **LUCASARTS**
DEVELOPER: **TRAVELLER'S TALES**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **FEBRUARY**

Lego Star Wars III: The Clone Wars

All the classic scenes you don't remember, now in great Lego form

Where do you turn when your popular children's toy and much-loved science-fiction series hybrid runs out of original material? To the expanded universe, of course! Specifically that rich seam of it which has already thrown up a vast quantity of books, comics, CGI films and TV series. *The Clone Wars* won't be



If you don't recognise this beast, your knowledge of the expanded universe isn't very extensive. Or Traveller's Tales has simply made it up

following any of this material religiously, however, picking its battles instead in order to focus on the encounters best suited to the Lego series' toybox recreations.

As with *Lego Batman*, *The Clone Wars* has to work extra hard to make up for the absence of iconic, wink-to-the-camera set-pieces. While the series' child-friendly, lenient approach to failure remains unchanged, Traveller's Tales does appear to be attempting to make this latest iteration a more action-rich experience, both by bolstering the number of attack powers at the player's disposal and designing more varied missions.

The first scene we see is a vehicle section, in which Jedi Plo Kloon (one of the bit-part Jedi you may dimly recall being murdered in Revenge Of The Sith) attacks General Grievous' starship's exterior. Players are able to hop in and out of their starfighter as they carry out bombing runs on the ship, leaping on to exposed platforms and tearing droids to tiny plastic bits using a selection of Force powers – thrown Lightsabers, Force push and other moves – which capture more than





You'd struggle to make some of these structures at home. General Grievous' flagship The Malevolence (above) looks as though it would require roughly ten Christmases' worth of bricks, and the same amount of time, to build

a hint of *The Force Unleashed*'s potency. The internal phase of the attack ends with the player solving a simple puzzle and setting the ship on a collision course with a nearby moon. It's a dramatic end to a level packed with spectacle, but it does leave you wondering just how much of this particular toy set's appeal depended on the rock-solid foundations of its source material.













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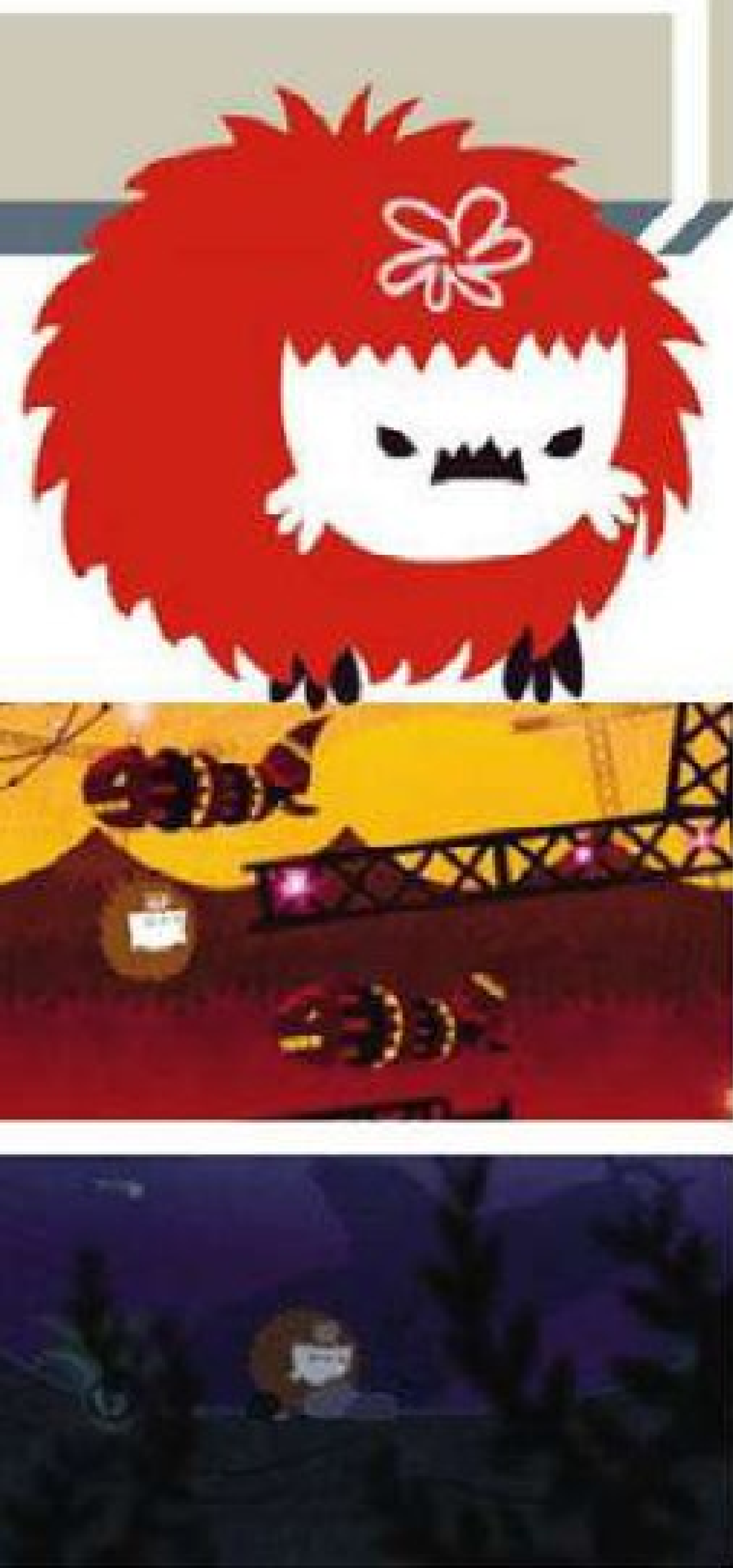


SONY
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FORMAT: **WINDOWS PHONE 7**
PUBLISHER: **TBC**
DEVELOPER: **ANGRY MANGO**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **TBC**

Mush

Aiming to raise a smile, plus sadness and confusion, from puzzle fans



The lead character (the team has never agreed on what it actually is) changes in size with each emotion, and this affects where it can go; sadness makes the creature smaller, allowing access through tighter doorways and tunnels





The beautiful hand-drawn environments appear simple, but include plenty of physics elements and nicely animated obstacles such as rotating mazes. There's also a decent amount of replayability: when you collect new emotions later in the game, you're able to head back to earlier levels and access new areas. There are 13 levels, each with dominant colours that reflect the principal emotion of that section

When we reported on the X48 Game Camp in March '09 (**E**215), a project named *Giant Ego* stood out from the other competitors thanks to its beautiful art direction and interesting emotion-based game mechanic. The team of final-year students from the University of Newport have since massively refined the concept, changed the name and won the Dare To Be Digital game design competition. Not bad considering Angry Mango has had little access to its target platform, the formative Windows Phone 7. Instead, it prototyped the project on an imported Zune HD, while beta software, development documentation and graphics libraries slowly filtered in.

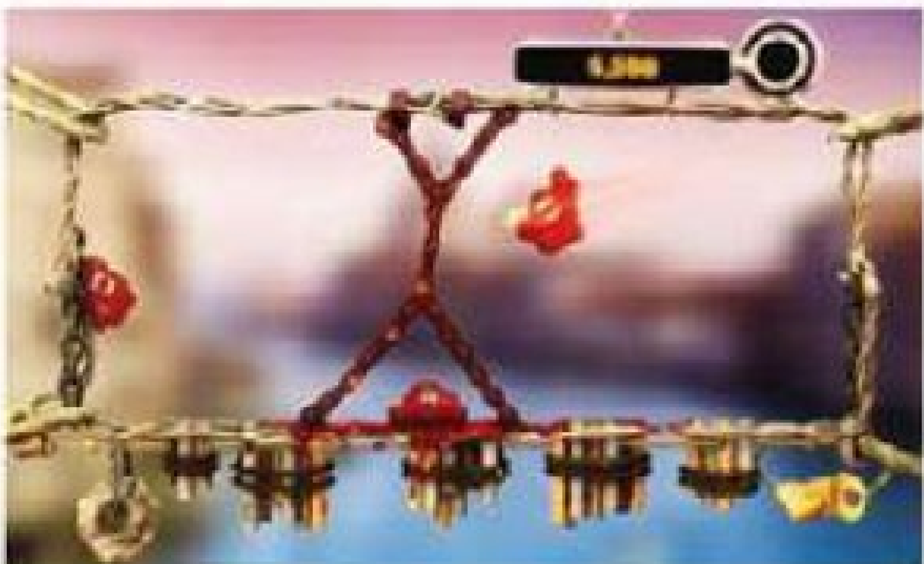
At first glance, *Mush* is a standard *Rolando*-style platformer with a cutesy lead character and some physics-based puzzles. Tired of living in a village with no emotions, the titular hero has set out to collect a range of feelings and bring them home. Happiness, for example, makes the character larger and lets him float to new areas of the map, while sadness shrinks him and allows him to sink to the bottom of water pools. Emotions are accessed through the touchscreen, so players must draw a smile or a frown to prompt the relevant state, although anger is cleverly accessed by shaking the device, while confusion requires you to turn the phone (and your world) upside down. This UI could easily have been a gimmick, but combined with the tilt controls used to move left and right, it's comfortable and intuitive. Figuring out the game's range of physics puzzles – which involve switches, rolling balls and working out how the physical size of the character must be managed to access different doorways – seems a lot more immersive and immediate when freed from the burden of multiple button presses.

It is, however, the visual flair that really impresses. The team took its early cues from offbeat illustrators such as Bob Staake and Christopher Lee, but has developed its own luscious combination of flat-coloured, iconic creature designs and warm, richly graded backgrounds. Each of the 13 levels is filled with impressionistic texture, the colouration reflecting the dominant emotion needed to progress. It feels a teeny bit slow at the moment, and some puzzles need to be more clearly signposted, but *Mush* is a delight to explore – and since it's been developed using Microsoft's cross-platform XNA 4 framework, an Xbox 360 version is a distinct and intriguing possibility. 

Confetti Carnival

Bombs, physics and gelatinous gloop combine to create an appealingly nonsensical jumble

FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **TBC**
DEVELOPER: **SPIKYSNAIL**
ORIGIN: **ISRAEL**
RELEASE: **2011**



Levels are constructed out of pieces of twine, sticks and elastic bands. They are designed, along with the physics system, to encourage imaginative combo manoeuvres

Totally abstract games feel like rarities nowadays. Even obtuse concepts get saddled with unconvincing narratives, the likes of *Puzzle Quest* and *Henry Hatsworth* somehow bringing epic plots to the match-three puzzler. New Israeli studio SpikySnail, however, is happy to admit that its physics-based downloadable puzzler makes no sense whatsoever.

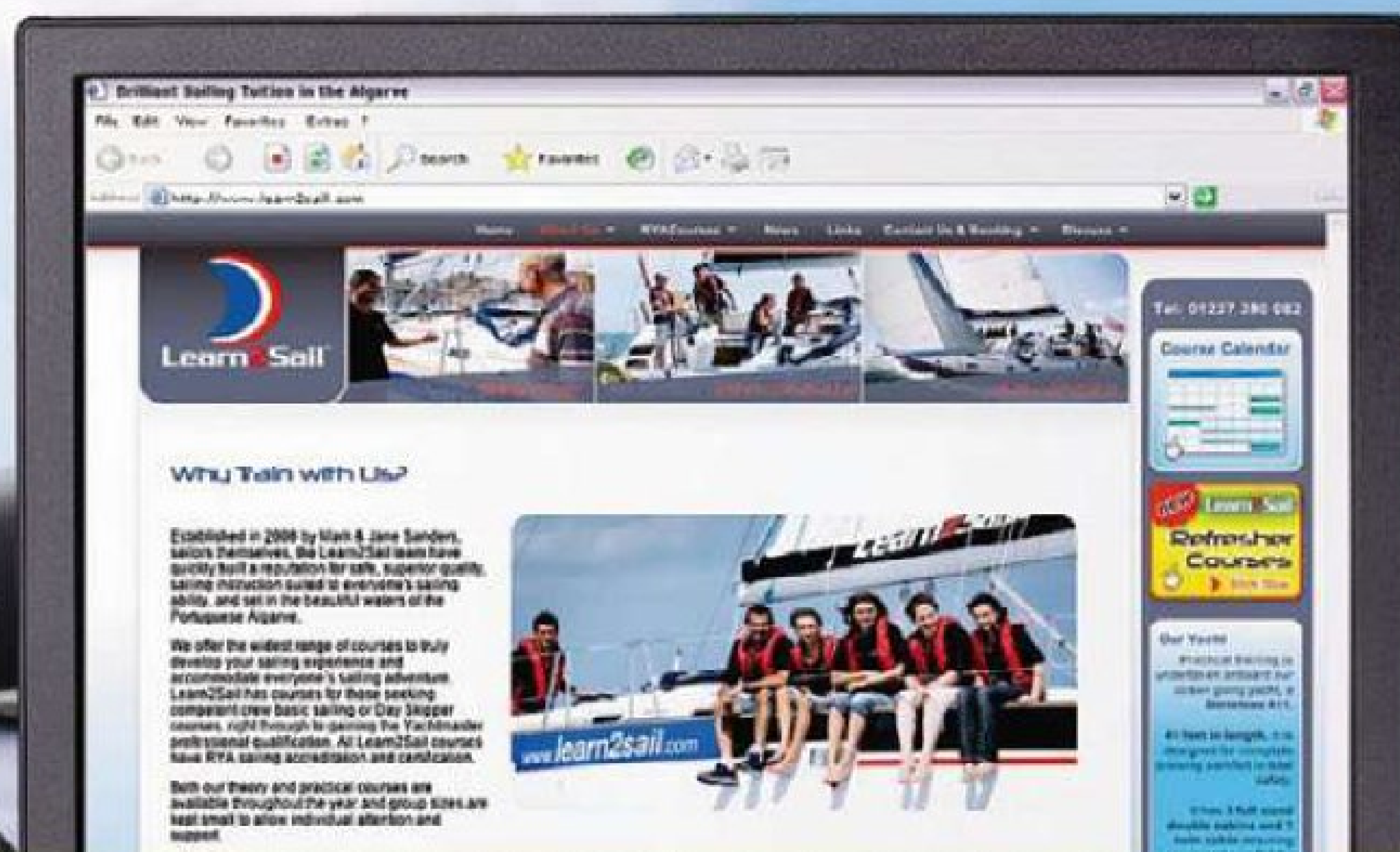


Various special moves are available, allowing the player to build up combo points with each move of the gummies

The player's job is to fling animate globules of sticky goo around a series of environments. Once you have a blob situated near a sticky clump of bombs, you can hit the Slam button, sending your goo blasting into the explosives, showering them with an incendiary liquid. The resulting detonation removes both your blob and the bombs, and the aim is to clear out all of the weapons before you run out of globules. Each of the 15 levels is filled with platforms and physics tests, and players must master the art of targeting slams accurately for maximum bomb-drenching potential. Picture a cross between *Puzzle Bobble*'s aiming with elements of *Angry Birds* and *The Incredible Machine* and the idea behind *Confetti Carnival* might just become clear.

Additional complexity is added by the presence of special moves, which players use to add more destructive capabilities. There's also a momentum-reverse feature, instigated with the left trigger, which alters the course of each impact between goo and bomb. While giants like *Zuma* and *Peggle* demonstrate that puzzle games should be immediately accessible, *Confetti Carnival* requires an hour's play before most participants will have a clue what's going on. The two-man team behind the game may need to rein in some of its quirkier ideas to court the PopCap demographic.

At least the visuals should garner immediate attention, with environments constructed out of beautifully drawn sticks, ropes and oddments of cloth in a manner reminiscent of *LittleBigPlanet*, while the liquid effects are highly naturalistic. Bomb explosions send out confetti (hence the title), and when you combo a few hits together, the screen fills with showers of sparkling paper like a bizarre ticker tape parade. It's an attractive effect – it's just unclear how many players will develop the skills necessary to pull off such a display. 



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A lot can happen when you shoot someone. You might start a revolution, throw a spanner (or crowbar) in the works of alien plans, realise you're insane, or break the universe. Your victim might do a sorry dance, fold like an accordion, cradle the wound and seek cover, eat the bullets and laugh, or just explode into a thousand spots of blood which then flock into your pocket. You could feel high or low, cool or cruel. In the brief history of the FPS, you might well have done the lot. The message this year: you ain't done nothin' yet.

In *Crysis 2*, you can throw a grenade a hundred yards, dash into the explosion and kick a family car into whatever's left standing. In *Bulletstorm*, you can yank the pilot from a helicopter, shoot him in the crown jewels and make him grateful for the coup de grâce. In *Bodycount*, the definition of a flanking manoeuvre is to carve a soldier-shaped hole in the enemy's back door. And in *Killzone 3* – well, someone has to keep things classy – you hold down the trigger until no one fires back.

For these and countless other reasons, not least the movements of *Call Of Duty*, 2011 might be the most important year in the history of the genre. Each of the aforementioned games, joining the likes of *Brink*, *Rage* and countless mods, has the potential to be a landmark. Will you look at things differently on a 3DTV? Does a lack of a sandbox or original storytelling matter? Is physics simulation, as suggested by Nvidia in E223, the greatest thing since sliced polygons? And AI? Wherever the FPS aims, gaming looks for signs of what's to come. Now let's see what targets it can hit.







KILLZONE 3

BIGGER, YES, AND FASTER. BUT BETTER? THE ONLY PLATFORM EXCLUSIVE ON THE LIST, KILLZONE 3 HAS PLENTY TO PROVE

FORMAT: **PS3**
PUBLISHER: **SCEE**
DEVELOPER: **GUERRILLA GAMES**
ORIGIN: **THE NETHERLANDS**
RELEASE: **FEBRUARY 28**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E220**



It was back in May 2010 that Guerrilla Games revealed its new direction for game dialogue: "We said to [our sound director], 'Go through the entire database, and anything that's got 'shit' or 'fuck' in it, just get rid of it, we don't want to hear it ever again'." It is precisely ten seconds into the latest *Killzone 3* preview that Sergeant Rico Velasquez has a slight disagreement over battle plans with his superior, Captain Narville.

Narville: "Velasquez, apart from being ill-conceived and poorly executed, your plans cost more lives than they save." "My plans cost lives?" hoots Velasquez. "How many people did you f–" He exhales, and so the most foul-mouthed hero this side of *House Of The Dead: Overkill* is censored, continuing: "Look, all I'm saying is we need to scout ahead, OK?" "You have your orders, sergeant – this is not a discussion." Velasquez stops to form his riposte. "Mother*fucker*!" Well, at least he tried.

Killzone 3 might yet be a 'thinking man's shooter', but it's not a shooter about thinking men. For one thing, it's impossible to actually hear yourself think on the killing fields of Helghan, a colony built where none has a right to exist, and where Guerrilla Games is sticking to some of the loudest guns in videogame history. Others just fire; these erupt – and the enemy's guns erupt back.

IT'S IMPOSSIBLE TO ACTUALLY HEAR YOURSELF THINK ON THE KILLING FIELDS OF HELGHAN, WHERE GUERRILLA GAMES IS STICKING TO SOME OF THE LOUDEST GUNS IN VIDEOGAME HISTORY. OTHERS JUST FIRE; THESE ERUPT

To make matters worse, many in the demo are fixed atop a mech the size of the Mall Of America, which has decided to take a stroll through Tomas 'Sev' Sevchenko's (your) band of bickering soldiers. They're bickering because the invasion of Helghan, played out in *Killzone 2*, has gone belly-up, leaving just a hundred or so survivors to fight the Helghast's deadliest weapons.

For a boss battle comparison, imagine if the skyscraper boss from *Resistance 2* was twice as



Top left: No, it's obviously not an in-game shot, but it gives an idea of brand of carnage *K3* is continuing

Above: The sense of scale here is incredible, but the underlying mechanics feel a little stale

interesting as it was, making it half as interesting as it should have been. Beyond its incredible size – the impression of scale, largely conveyed by atmospheric conditions, is really quite spectacular – nothing comes as much of a surprise. You dash between bunkers as the mech fires its lightning, then cripple it with rockets while it catches its breath (opening its exhaust ports). Every now and then, a team of Helghast drops in and wishes it hadn't. Then, finally, the beast is downed. No, wait… it's up again… down again… a bit wobbly… Is it? Yes, it's down. So says the cutscene.

A point about the Helghast, briefly. In the demo – and this may have been a fluke – they seem a lot less British than usual. At any rate, they no longer sound like a bunch of civil engineers who've just found out that the burger van's driven off early, which is a shame. We can only hope that this is a pre-release issue and that they'll be as cantankerous as ever upon release.

There's a perception issue with this demo, which is that it is, and yet isn't, a boss battle – it's more a level disguised as a boss battle. Moreover, if you take Guerrilla at its word, this is, and yet isn't, *Killzone 3*. In the interview that follows, the studio leads seem frustrated by the fact that they can show us only episodes, mere pieces of an epic Helghan travelogue that, they claim, will recapture the first game's sense of discovery and progress. We dearly hope this is genuine.

Movement in the new game is a great deal smoother than in *Killzone 2*, much closer to a *COD* or *Halo* and sure to benefit the game's multiplayer. We're not sure it makes for as dramatic a shooter –





Witnessing this mechanical monster tear up some familiar-looking scenery is certainly exhilarating, but key to the game's appeal could be a widened range of environments

Killzone was unique in that respect – but we do know this: the game overall must be just as agile. Scale aside, this new demo could happily sit amid *Killzone 2*'s monotone action and industrial squalor, so let's hope that the ice level, Frozen Shores, is just the tip of the… never mind.

Guerrilla's desire to mix things up is laudable, if old-fashioned. The demo switches freely between boss, cutscene and infantry firefight before taking to the sky for its climax. The problems in this case are the ingredients: a boss beaten by simple dodging and auto-lock missiles; cutscenes full of exciting things you can't actually do in-game; a mounted gun for the scenes in the sky. There's dust on these ideas, and it continues to cloud the series' brightest feature: intense, violent, captivating gunplay.

The best new qualities we're looking at in *Killzone 3*, then, are still largely confined to hypothesis and PR. There's word of a deeper and more intriguing story (the events of *Killzone 2* have triggered a Helghast civil war, which promises insights into their culture and humanity), and a greater commitment to the chemistry between actors. But what's all this vapid talk of using *Uncharted 2* for inspiration, and replacing the 'grim overtones' of the last game with a more 'light-hearted approach'? It's subjective but, to us, those last few words have no place near a *Killzone* game at all.

Could it be that *Killzone* has begun to question the universe it's created? It has, after all, watched the crown of massmarket dominance pass between *Halo* and *Call Of Duty*, and into the sights of *Crysis* and *Bulletstorm*. It's been sidelined as the world of multiplayer has changed and changed again relentlessly. It's seen the PS3 standard taken on great adventures by Naughty Dog, and now it's headlining 3D and Move support, becoming easily the most accessorised shooter featured this issue. It is a game surrounded by distractions.

What it needs – and what it might very well have, for all we know – is a readiness to break entirely from the current FPS arms race if, for reasons beyond its control, that's a fight it simply cannot win. There is still a place for a grimy, po-faced shooter that doesn't shy from the blistering, numbing effect of soldiery in the heat of battle, especially in science-fiction, when backed by terrific combat, state-of-the-art technology, bold art direction, professional actors and an iconic enemy. *Killzone* has all of those guns, and hopefully it knows how to use them.

"WE'RE GOING FROM THE HELGHAST INTERPRETATION OF JUNGLE TO VERY KILLZONE-ESQUE SCRAPYARDS, AND AT THE END WE GO INTO SPACE. IT'S A BIG DEPARTURE FROM KILLZONE 2, WHERE THE FIRST FIVE LEVELS WERE ALL URBAN SETTINGS"

Q&A: Mathijs de Jonge (game director) & Hermen Hulst (managing director), Guerrilla Games

The first *Killzone* was a highly distinctive shooter with a unique physicality to the way it felt when you played it, but the series seems to be moving away from that.

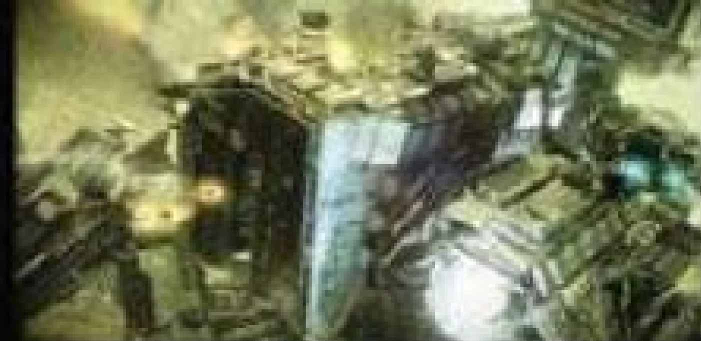
Mathijs de Jonge: Yeah, it's definitely shifted a bit away from what *Killzone* was. We've managed to retain a little bit of the heavy feeling of how you handle the gun: the reload speed, the length and weight of jump animations. But the thing with *Killzone 2* was that there were quite some technical problems in the controls, actually, and I think we've solved those now. There was a lot of lag in *K2* but the controls in the demo are more responsive, so if you want to turn around, the camera immediately responds. And by fixing those issues we've lost a bit of that weighty feeling.

We've tried to maintain that original experience, but if we'd kept it as slow, we'd run in to the danger of losing some people, moving too far away from our competitors.

Do you regret that, though? That there isn't enough latitude in the market to make an artistic statement?

MDJ: Maybe, in a way, but on the other hand, while we were still tweaking controls and checking framerate, I checked this game back-to-back with *Killzone 2* and have to say that it plays so much more fluidly. Also, the adjustments we made to lean-and-peek – you can actually slide into cover now, vault over, brutally melee your enemies – it feels more fluid, stutters less. There's fewer points of irritation. In a way, it would be nice to make an artistic statement and do it exactly the way we want, but what we've done now is also how we want it, it's just smoother.











Though the controls are a little less heavy than before, you can still expect the guns to pack a punch (and a brutal report to match)



BUDDYING UP

Playing in 3D without your glasses isn't the only cause of double-vision in the demo. Splitscreen co-op sees two players enjoy the singleplayer game with almost complete independence, the only need to actually collaborate being to dash to your fallen ally with a defibrillator paddle. The cutscenes are identical and the screen setup is the *Resident Evil 5* variety: a crooked pair of two square windows. Coupled with the game's low FOV, it makes navigation something of a chore – a small arrow on the HUD guiding you to a partner you still can't properly track. On the upside, it actually features that massive mech being rendered twice at a respectable framerate, and there's something to be said for that.

The new game sounds more adventurous with its different terrain types. Will that hark back to the first game's sense of discovery?

Hermen Hulst: Yeah. A big improvement over *Killzone 2* is that we're looking to have pretty much a unique setting for each level, which also makes it really hard to send levels out for preview to you guys, because as soon as you send an ice level out, people think it's an ice game – or a big boss game. But the big thing about this game is variety. We're going from the Helghast interpretation of jungle to very *Killzone*-esque scrapyards, and at the end we go into space. It's a big departure from *Killzone 2*, where the first five levels were all urban settings.

When you deliver a mech battle as colossal as the demo's, can you get away with another?

HH: There are a number of very big things in there, but the beauty of this game is that we're pacing it very differently. So we're looking for the perfect build-up to a moment like this. What this level does very well, I think, is capture the feeling we want the player to have. We want you to feel like David taking on Goliath, because the story here is that your invasion fleet's been wiped out, you're stuck with just a hundred or so guys, and you never realised your enemy's so much stronger than you thought. And this all culminates in that giant walking battle station. So it's positioned very specifically, but do not expect all of the game to be like that. That would, from a production perspective, be very unwise, but also from a story and pacing perspective. We want the player to breathe out and get ready for that scene.



Hermen Hulst, managing director, Guerilla Games



Mathijs de Jonge, game director, *Killzone 3*

Rico Velasquez was a confusing character in the second game – abrasive and yet a close ally and AI partner. Is the ambivalence deliberate?

MDJ: We wanted him to be more of a true buddy. Obviously he was in *Killzone 2*, but he was also – and we did this on purpose – a nuisance. He triggered a lot of emotion both good and bad. Here, he's more useful from a gameplay perspective – you don't just have to keep reviving him. And while it doesn't show in the level you've played, he also helps you out and revives you, so there's an incentive to keep him alive. That's an integral part of who Rico is; he's the guy you're very closely connected with but, as Sev, you're in between him and the third part of the triangle, Narville, the captain, who follows orders and gives orders. Either strategy is ineffective by itself, so you have to choose who to be like.

Last year you said that you'd go through the game and take out all of the swearing, but it's still there in the preview build. What's your philosophy about that?

MDJ: In *Killzone 2* we ended up with too much of it. The thing about swearing is that it's highly effective when it's done right, and in *Killzone 3* I think there's some swearing but it feels a lot more impactful. It's at the right times. You've played through a level where there's the most swearing of all of them. In total, I think there's seven "fuck you"s and one "motherfucker". I think that's fine.

The *Killzone* games have acted as a vehicle for a lot of Sony's latest technology releases: Sixaxis, Move, 3D and even the PlayStation 3 hardware itself. How much of that do you instigate, and how much authority do you have over its use?

HH: I like that question. It's something that's very much core to the group of people we have here. A lot of the people are, as you've probably noticed, very tech-oriented and savvy, and we like to experiment with new hardware and new hardware features. Of course, we're aware that we sold the company and are now part of a broader family, but this is by choice. We're always the first studio to say, "Cool – can we try something out?" I don't want to be too scared with picking up new things, because it's innovation, it's healthy. If you're working on a series, you're looking for new things to do, and it's fantastic work. The guys who get asked to work on 3D… or the gun peripheral, for instance, that's something we designed here, for all of Sony's studios.



CRYSIS 2

CRYTEK TAKES THE FIGHT TO THE URBAN JUNGLE, BUT IS THERE A DANGER THAT THE GAME IS TOO WELL CAMOUFLAGED AMONG THE FPS CROWD?

FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **EA**
DEVELOPER: **CRYTEK**
ORIGIN: **GERMANY**
RELEASE: **MARCH 25**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E212**



Our previous visit to Crytek's Frankfurt headquarters to see *Crysis 2* was a much warmer affair. But back in March 2010, the developer wasn't ready to offer control of its latest creation to the attending throng of journalists, so our experience was strictly hands-off. Today, however, the city is buried under a layer of December snow that wouldn't look out of place in the icy transformation that occurs during the first *Crysis*' second half. And today, the controller rests in our hands for the first time.

Our session begins with a short intro, in which images of an aggressive-looking virus and a world map are shown, along with plenty of small text appearing onscreen to a familiar twinkling sci-fi tone. After the cinematic has run its course, the level in which we're about to be set loose fades into view through a hazy blur. We're told that this stage arrives halfway through the game, and that, because the story's finer points are still under wraps, context will have to wait. Whatever occurred previously can have been of no small importance, however, because as the haze dissipates, our hero is gradually returning to consciousness.

A group of patrolling marines has discovered us prone, lying in a pool of water among broken rock and swaying flora in the shadow of a stricken Manhattan. Waterfalls cascade from broken pipes, now exposed by the destruction, and the camera tracks the blurry images of the marines as their conversation plays out and our eyes struggle to focus on a tantalisingly expansive vista. The invite is extended to join the patrol, of course, and clarity comes rushing back as we're tossed a handgun and finally find the strength to stand.

The scene ahead is an intricate tangle of broken buildings, twisted metal girders caked in crumbling concrete, and discarded vehicles, guiding the player's eye along a conspicuously linear path. The vista is undeniably affecting, huge skyscrapers rising from the top of the deep, newly gouged ravine we're standing in, while the torrent of water from those broken pipes rushes downhill. This is clearly a disaster of significant proportions.

But for all Crytek's talk of "choreographed sandboxes", it's difficult not to feel a twinge of disappointment as the genre tropes of conveniently blocked-off routes and guided progress make themselves apparent in the sequel to a game that prided itself on choice. And that concern is compounded by the combination of *Crysis 2*'s distressed urban aesthetic, organically styled alien dropships and familiar marine cohorts. In a world of *Killzone 3*, *Half-Life 2*, *Resistance 2* and *Halo: Reach*, Crytek's demonstration of CryEngine 3 suddenly looks, for all its stunning fidelity, in danger of losing its individuality and impact.

As we travel farther into the level, however, we penetrate one of Crytek's much-vaunted 'action bubbles'. An animalistic dropship delivers its alien payload, sending pods crashing into the ground and bursting open to reveal their occupants. So far, so *Halo*, then, but as we engage the blockade, *Crysis 2*'s personality asserts itself, and what was simply a strikingly detailed mess of strewn rubble before – wrecked buses and exposed pipework – in an instant becomes a multi-layered arena of strategic possibilities. Any thoughts of linearity are quickly discarded as the sensation of power engendered by the Nanosuit comes rushing back and we instantly feel like a superhero again, switching effortlessly between the suit's various augmentations while dispatching the alien aggressors.

The Nanosuit 2 certainly feels no less capable when controlled using the 360 pad, and the thoughtful placement of powers – stealth and armour on the shoulder bumpers, while speed is accessed by clicking the left stick when running – makes moving between each both intuitive and

WHILE THERE'S NO OPPORTUNITY TO FACE OFF AGAINST THE CRYNET SYSTEMS INFANTRY, WE DON'T MISS HUMAN ADVERSARIES. IT'S CLEAR THAT THE INVADING ALIEN FORCE WILL REQUIRE THE FULL GAMUT OF ABILITIES TO BRING THEM DOWN

Above left: New York lies in ruins after an alien invasion. The destruction makes for some engaging topography

Above: The Crynet infantry are nowhere to be seen, but with so many aliens to shoot, they aren't missed

devastatingly fast. Indeed, showboating is easier than it's ever been, and is positively encouraged thanks to the slide manoeuvre which allows players to move across ground between points of cover while firing on the enemy. And those points of cover, incidentally, work as well as we'd hoped, snapped to with a simple button press and occasionally offering a mounted gun (detachable, of course) to stack the odds in the player's favour.

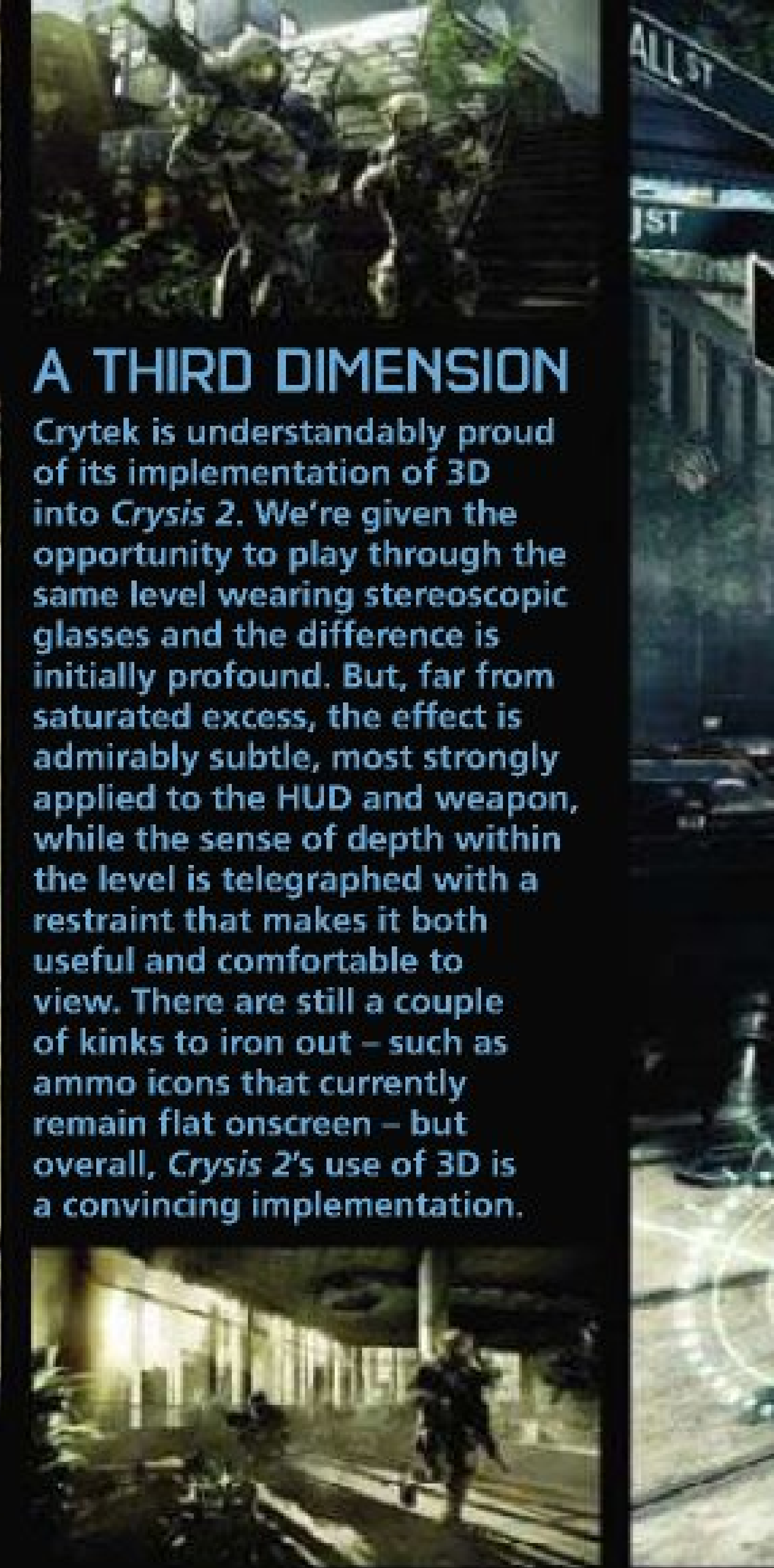
So too does the Nanosuit 2's new tactical mode, which, along with revealing the position of enemies, allies, weapon caches and objectives, also points to more playful activities – scanning the level, we see the word "slide" hovering in the distance and make our way over to what turns out to be a steep slope crowned with a large, open pipe. A quick run up and we're zipping down the incline before launching into the air over a jump. Clearly, suit manufacturer Crynet wants its customers to enjoy more than just its product's military potential. Other level furniture, such as cars that can be stuck with explosives and kicked toward the enemy, widen the ad-hoc warrior's options.

While there's no opportunity to face off against the Crynet Systems infantry this time, we don't miss human adversaries. It's clear that the invading alien force will require the full gamut of abilities to bring them down. No longer floating above the fight in the detached manner of the first game, the creatures we face are bipedal and worryingly intelligent. The first encounter throws up two classes: grunts and stalkers. The former are aggressive and powerful, absorbing a hefty stream of bullets before finally falling, while the latter are lithe and acutely aware of their environment. Attempt to rush a stalker in cover and it will retreat to safety before recommencing its volley of fire on your position. And even in this pre-alpha build, no gap or route seems too awkward for the AI. We see one stalker squeeze into a tiny space between a bus and a crate in order to circle round and flank our position. Indeed, an enclosed battle with a rocket-launcher-wielding foe later in the level is made all the more fraught by several stalkers forcing us to divert fire from the main threat in order to prevent them from taking cover behind us.

Following this encounter, a glimpse beyond the next ridge reveals a vast crater in which a large alien ship floats ominously among monolithic buildings now marooned on islands. The level appears to only just be getting going, but we won't be seeing any more today because our guide informs us that now would be a good time to stop. So, *Crysis 2* works on consoles, but did anyone really doubt that Crytek could pull it off? The game feels robust and supremely polished, but since Crytek insists on keeping the majority of the game under wraps, it's not clear what else *Crysis 2* has up its Nanosuit's sleeves in order to help it stand out among the packed sci-fi shooter genre.




The Nanosuit 2 has a new tactical mode that reveals the location of enemies as well as an area's points of interest



A THIRD DIMENSION

Crytek is understandably proud of its implementation of 3D into *Crysis 2*. We're given the opportunity to play through the same level wearing stereoscopic glasses and the difference is initially profound. But, far from saturated excess, the effect is admirably subtle, most strongly applied to the HUD and weapon, while the sense of depth within the level is telegraphed with a restraint that makes it both useful and comfortable to view. There are still a couple of kinks to iron out – such as ammo icons that currently remain flat onscreen – but overall, *Crysis 2*'s use of 3D is a convincing implementation.

Q&A: Cevat Yerli (president and creative director), Crytek

What guarantees can you offer, once and for all, that the PC version of *Crysis 2* will be texturally equal to or better than *Crysis*?
You know what's funny? When we released *Crysis*, back then people didn't judge it for that. I'm frustrated about this. We said it was a game that was pushing boundaries, which would stay relevant in the future, and all we got was a backlash: "This game doesn't run!" Then games came out for the same hardware that weren't running at all, or were choppy and whatnot despite low-res graphics. Yet we were the bad guys for pushing PC graphics, making it too expensive to play. Whatever we do seems to be wrong.

Anyway, will *Crysis 2* have hi-res textures; will it get blurry? *Crysis 2* will have a PC version that's a PC game. We're going to push it as much as the engine can take. It'll be at least as beautiful as *Crysis*, but the context is different. It's New York. Not a jungle, but an urban jungle.

You have to understand that the budget for *Crysis* was much lower than for *Crysis 2*. We could spend much more on *Crysis 2* because we expected to sell more through multiplatform development. So PC gamers will get a better game out of that; it isn't just take, it's also give. The gameplay has received much more research about accessibility, streamlining and making it more fun, but also making it deeper. So every angle is improved. The amount of diligence and production volume we've spent makes it so much better than *Crysis*.

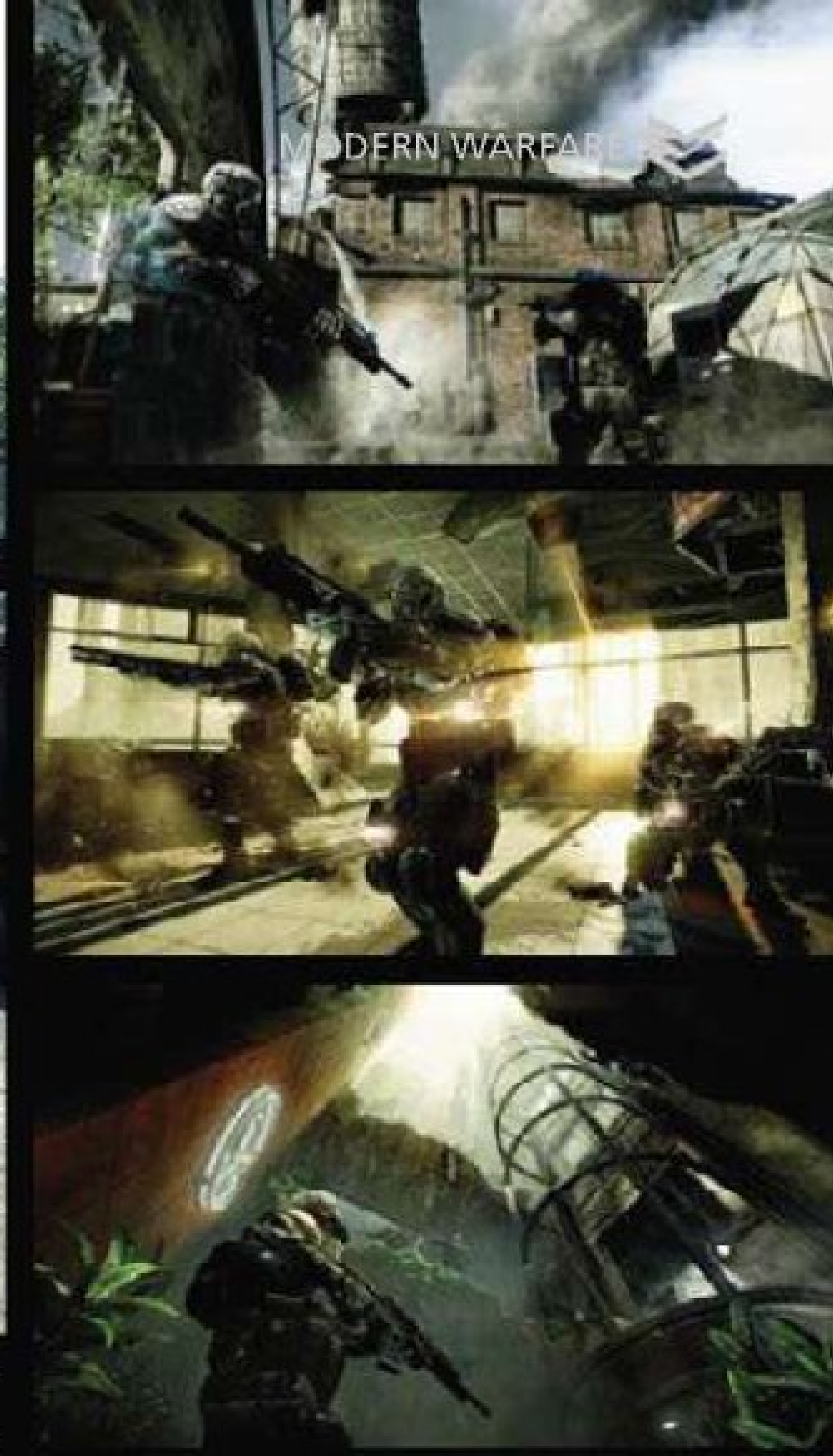
Part of the fear from gamers comes down to the hardware maturing while many of the games seem to regress: console control systems, FOVs, textures. PC gamers are just fed up of it.
Yeah. *Crysis 2* doesn't suffer from that, in my opinion – it's superior from every angle. But this isn't necessarily a game you can't play today, or where you need another two years to max it out. That's not the approach this time. Now, it's more like we want to give you the best PC experience with current high-end equipment. So if you bought the last high-end graphics card, you're going to get a blast out of it. Likewise, the minimum-spec experience will be of a far higher quality than *Crysis* was.

Some people just didn't get the combat in *Crysis*. It was almost too 'sandboxy', and let them get away with the bare minimum.
It's a fair point. In *Crysis* we didn't force the player too much, we had them choose. But that devalued the Nanosuit itself, and sometimes people used it sporadically here and there but didn't really push it. They didn't feel they needed it to win. So what we did is made sure the AI is smarter in *Crysis 2*, and you have to be damn powerful to fight them.

Have you made it more linear to help focus that intensity?
I wouldn't say it's a more linear game. When people think that, they haven't played it. I would say that maybe some areas are flowing more – we don't


Cevat Yerli, president and creative director, Crytek





Stalkers (pictured) are the smartest, fastest enemies we've seen to date. Such encounters contrast with grunt battles, which serve up more resilient targets

have 1x1km islands because New York doesn't offer that – but wherever we have play space available we try to offer a choreographed sandbox. Choreographed doesn't mean linear – you don't have to follow the script. You can change some outcomes and others are predefined, but you can play as you want.

It was 'action bubbles' in the first game – bottlenecks and playgrounds. Are you taking the same approach this time around?
It's the same structure. But there are action bubbles here as big as some *Crysis* levels, and in a true 3D sphere. *Crysis* was a 2D sandbox, if you like, and this is 3D. You have much more height to play with, and you can engage that however you want.

Antialiasing. It was an issue with the foliage in *Crysis*. Is it a card manufacturers' problem?
Yes and no, actually. I'll be happy when they come up with something you just toggle on and have the user choose between performance and quality, but with the deferred pipeline we have, traditional MSAA implementations aren't working out. It's the way many modern engines work. That said, we do have some smart antialiasing systems going on and they're not edge-softening solutions either. We've got something really nice going on there.

There was a bit of confusion over the source of the latest screenshots released. Which platform did they came from? PC?
I think they were a mix. There was one 360 and the others were PC. But honestly, the PC version hasn't been shown off yet at all. They were rendered out of PC but at console settings. The PC settings aren't being disclosed at all right now. We haven't made any screenshots yet that show the PC settings.

What kind of role is Crytek UK, formerly Free Radical Design, playing in development? What qualities is it bringing?
We're using them for our awesome multiplayer [laughs]. They've done an amazing job. We said from the beginning that we wanted a faster multiplayer experience, but when two people meet it shouldn't be instant death. It should be based on the tactics of the Nanosuit, so it becomes a showdown between two masters. Faster, then, but deeper. And the Nanosuit has the power-jump, power-run, slides and ledge-grabs, so it empowers you to traverse the maps much faster and more fluidly than you're used to in other games. It feels different every second to every other shooter, I think, and that's very powerful.

Are any ideas from the abandoned Crytek games – *Engalus*, *Silent Space*, and so on – working their way into the *Crysis* games?
There was one project we developed exclusively in stereoscopic 3D – and we started that two-and-a-half years ago. It was designed to be only possible in 3D, so we asked what it'd take to make that. So we've done a lot of research into 3D experiences, the UI and whatnot. And a lot of this knowledge is now in the *Crysis 2* 3D experience. That's why we have, in my opinion, a benchmark 3D implementation. I'll even claim it's the same as Avatar's status in 3D. James Cameron has seen *Crysis 2*, and he loved what he saw because his eyes are trained for 3D more than anyone else's, and that makes me confident that we have a super-high-end 3D experience on all formats.

> "JAMES CAMERON HAS SEEN CRYSIS 2, AND HE LOVED WHAT HE SAW BECAUSE HIS EYES ARE TRAINED FOR 3D MORE THAN ANYONE ELSE'S, AND THAT MAKES ME CONFIDENT THAT WE HAVE A SUPER-HIGH-END 3D EXPERIENCE ON ALL FORMATS"

Why did James Cameron play it?
Well, that's another story [laughs].

Does being "the best FPS" mean keeping a close eye on your rivals?
Just to be clear, I'm not a person who says we have to beat *Call Of Duty* or whatever. It's not about dethroning anybody. We don't say, "Hey, we want to make a *Halo* killer." It's not about this. I tried to make Crytek a specialist, about finding unique second-by-second experiences no one's done yet. If that results in a number one title that's better than *COD*, be my guest. But I'm not saying we're better than them. We're different. We're not even trying to be *Halo* meets *COD* – because I've read those comparisons.

I'm not saying we'll have the best AI, either. Why? Because some of these games don't even have AI, they have scripted events. *Far Cry*, *Crysis* and *Crysis 2*: each has had the best AI Crytek's done so far. And I want people to experience that on consoles as well has PC.

What challenges are presented to the AI by the urban environment?
The big thing about New York is that it's about traversal of vertical spaces, and the AI has to negotiate geometry that isn't terrain-only. So we needed aliens that could jump around, above and beyond you in 3D ways. Similarly, with the human AI, they have to traverse more complex buildings – interior spaces, staircases, and so on. So it's much more involved and works in a richly propped world, as opposed to an organic world. You have all kinds of props in a city, from cars to hotdog stands and destroyed roads. They're all technical challenges in a sandbox. If this was a linear shooter, we wouldn't have those problems. 



BULLETSTORM

LESS AN ART OF WAR THAN A CIRCUS OF PAIN, WITH ITS BOUNCING BOMBS AND ELECTRIC LEASHES, COULD BULLETSTORM BE ANY MORE FUN?

FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **EA**
DEVELOPER: **PCF, EPIC GAMES**
ORIGIN: **POLAND**
RELEASE: **FEBRUARY 25**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E215**



You learn to expect the unexpected from People Can Fly. So it's with inevitable utter shock that we find ourselves comparing *Bulletstorm* not to an FPS or even a game from this generation, but to The Bitmap Brothers' bloodsport *Speedball 2*. It's the slide that does it, a high-speed, zero-inertia shinning that guarantees a satisfying crunch. At best, it sends the victim floating through the air, which is where the comparison ends; never in *Speedball* did you blow your opponent's legs off or, conversely, blow your opponent off their legs.

You never wrapped a chain around their head that turned them into a bouncing bomb, fired a cannonball into their guts, stuck them to a cactus, fed them to a man-eating plant, volleyed them into a tornado, pulverised them with a four-barrel blast of compressed air, whizzed them into the blades of a helicopter on the business end of a firework, flattened them by kicking a door off its hinges, melted, castrated, immolated, electrocuted or called them horrible names. You certainly never did much of this at once.

EPIC HAS BROUGHT ORDER TO PCF'S CHAOS. OR MAYBE PCF HAS BROUGHT CHAOS TO EPIC'S ORDER. YOU'RE NEVER QUITE SURE. ALL THAT MATTERS IS THAT BULLETSTORM INFLICTS MORE DAMAGE ON PEOPLE THAN EVERY GEARS COMBINED

You might never have had as much fun in such short order as you will in the boots of Grayson Hunt. In a marriage made in action heaven, Epic has brought order to PCF's chaos. Or maybe PCF has brought chaos to Epic's order. You're never quite sure. All that matters is that *Bulletstorm* inflicts more damage on people than every *Unreal* and *Gears Of War* combined, yet manages to keep score.

We've had extensive hands-on time now, but only with the game's purest score attacks: the Echo singleplayer mode and co-operative Anarchy. So we'll just have to hope that Rick Remender's dialogue is as punchy as it seemed a couple of months ago, and is a match for the absolute bedlam on screen.

Top left: Echo mode sees you pick your favourite weapons and section of the game for a clean attack run

Above: If you can't be bothered with using bullets, you can always simply address your enemy with a boot



Echo is very smart, the kind of arcade mode people seldom bother to get right. A lot has to go into taking things out, you see, which is why most end up sticking a score atop the exact same story you've played through already, generously throwing in – the mere thought of it! – a level select option. Echo takes the idea seriously, stripping out dialogue and cutscenes to leave an unbroken attack run. You pick your weapons – up to three at once (not including the electric leash), which you can change at various waypoints – and a few minutes later you're looking at the scoreboard: a star rating, friends list leaderboard and tactical debriefing.

The first Echo flashes back to an early point in the game where Hunt and his partner, cyborg Ishi Sato, must battle their way towards a train that will take them to the urban centre of Elysium, a planet overrun by punks and killer-plant-type things. The gleaming city is a permanent backdrop to these platforms, elevators and corrugated tunnels, which twinkle under Unreal Engine's vastly improved Lightmass illumination, commercially debuted in *Enslaved: Odyssey To The West*. Abandoned cranes dangle buses above the action, and it goes without saying that it's all a bit Mad Max.

We choose the PMC rifle that's as close to a default weapon as this game has; the Bouncer, a cannon that fires an exploding ball which bounces for as long as you hold down the trigger; and the Flail, which resembles *Unreal Tournament*'s Flak Cannon but fires the aforementioned chain, wrapping explosives that detonate on command around whatever it touches. Like every weapon in *Bulletstorm*, each has an 'overcharge' mode, which



There's a huge variety of insane weapons at your disposal. There needs to be in order to dispatch enemies in such painful ways





SUPER-SOAKER

The phrase 'bullet sponge' is a dirty one in shooters, a reference to enemies that soak up bullets, cheapen your attacks and suggest a general lack of tactical precision play. But *Bulletstorm* is not your average shooter, and certainly no place for average enemies. There's an art to killing a single person with multiple weapons from multiple angles in ever more ingenious ways – and an artist needs a canvas that won't dissolve upon contact. Likewise, the player can take a colossal amount of damage, enough to let you experiment without fear of sudden death. This is a game as hard as you decide to make it, a truly progressive risk/reward shooter where threat is replaced by opportunity, and where the only thing *not* punished is you.

adds a new strategic layer. The PMC fires a high-power blast that can melt multiple targets (the 'X-Ray'), *Quake III Arena* railgun style; the Bouncer can leave its ball bouncing on a single spot, ready to ruin anyone you chuck or lure into it; the Flail can cut rather than wrap, decapitating enemies foolish enough to stand in a line (the 'French Revolution').

We could regale you with stories of just a handful of playthroughs for much of this issue; about the time we fired the bouncing cannonball blindly over an enemy barricade and satisfied ourselves with the screams and bonus points coming through the walls. Or when we 'leashed' the pilot out of a gunship, split him in half and punted whichever bit landed first. Or the elusive 'First In, Last Out' bonus awarded for starting a combo on one enemy, killing another and returning to finish the first one off. And the one everyone will achieve at the first opportunity: 'Mercy', the act of shooting someone in the groin, waiting for them to literally break down in tears, and magnanimously blowing their head off.

The other Echo we try, the helpfully named 'Collapsed Building', takes a leaf out of *Gears Of War 2*, presenting a tangled maze of upside-down corridors, flickering holographic clock faces, rubble piles and chunks of masonry begging to fall on enemy heads. Actually, 'fall' isn't quite the word for it. In one sequence, a giant lift shaft rests at just the right angle to send its carriage crashing down like a pile driver, pulping an entire oncoming squad. It's unclear how creative you can be with these scripted environmental kills, but nothing should stop an adept player causing plenty of havoc before the fatal moment.

Multiplayer in *Bulletstorm* is entirely co-operative and all the better for it. Halfway between *Gears'* Horde mode and *Counter-Strike*, it sends waves of enemies into arenas full of traps, bottlenecks and open spaces. As you can probably guess by now, the traps aren't for you. The goal of each wave isn't survival, but triumph, the only meaningful points coming from teamwork. The tactic of choice for our outfit was to thump gangs of enemies high into the air. Power-ups are bought between rounds, along with weapons, ammo and personal upgrades – presenting multiple targets for allied guns.

Q&A: Adrian Chmielarz, creative director, People Can Fly

You've gone from launching later than *Brink* and *Bodycount* to beating them to release.

What happened? Did they announce too early?
On the one hand, when it's a new IP you need a little bit more time for marketing than if it's a sequel or part number five. But you're completely right: you need to be really convinced that the game's going to be released more or less on time. In our case we knew. The game's been in development since 2007 so we already went with the prototyping, we'd already found the look and feel, we already had our internal demo, our vertical slice – so we had all the ingredients. You never know 100 per cent, but every party involved in our case was confident enough that now was the time, so we did it.

The game invites some unusual comparisons. Were there unlikely inspirations?
No, actually. I have a few, of course; it's part of my job to play every single one out there, good or bad. But, no, there was nothing like us taking the look of a game and making it better. It's just everything around us.

You've made a convincing case for bullet-sponge enemies.
Yeah, and we had no idea we were breaking so many rules. To me, the game looked like a small evolutionary step, but when we saw people playing it we realised that we're more outside the box than we thought. There were people having a problem with the fact that you have to fire 13 bullets into a guy. I'm sort of from the *QuakeWorld* (id's multiplayer update of the original *Quake*) school of thought. By that I mean that if you had a multiplayer duel in *QuakeWorld*, if it was a good guy against a noob, it usually ended up 62 to three. In more modern games, the score would end up 20 to five.

So we want to have these extreme highs and lows in *Bulletstorm*, meaning that if you try to play it like a normal shooter, take your basic gun and just

> "WE HAD NO IDEA WE WERE BREAKING SO MANY RULES. TO ME, THE GAME LOOKED LIKE A SMALL EVOLUTIONARY STEP, BUT WHEN WE SAW PEOPLE PLAYING IT WE REALISED THAT WE'RE MORE OUTSIDE THE BOX THAN WE THOUGHT"





Thanks to the Epic association, People Can Fly has an intimate relationship with the Unreal Engine tech. The warm visual tones belie *Bulletstorm*'s core violence

pump bullets into the chest of the enemy, then it's going to be the full 13. But if you start messing around – kicking a guy makes bullets more effective; if you go for the head it's just three bullets; charge your weapon and it's a press of the button – five guys could jump out of a corner and, rather than take a minute, you just charge your shotgun and everyone's dead. That's the design philosophy behind bullet sponges.

Comparisons with Firefly are inevitable and probably quite desirable. Is that kind of catchy dialogue, anti-hero-driven pulp the shooter's ultimate form?
Definitely not, because there's still this great disconnection between… well, it's something most games suffer from, to different degrees, depending on the game. But the designer is grabbing you and dragging you through the game, and your choices don't matter in the end. Maybe if you have two or three paths through the game, the illusion is there. But still, it's all smoke and mirrors, right? There isn't really a choice in these games.

What we tried to do – and this is a small step in the right direction – was to make sure that whatever happens in the cinematic is never really something great that you'll never do. Something cool happens but it's not… You know where you have these cinematics where you're on a mission to save someone, you're almost there and then the cinematic kicks in and you go: "Fuck!" So we try to avoid stuff like that. It's a more coherent experience and you don't really think about the fact that you're not in control of the destination.



Adrian Chmielarz, creative director, People Can Fly

All the weapons in *Bulletstorm* have upgrade paths. Were you determined to stop their powers and personalities overlapping?
It was one of the hardest things to do in the game. Another saying – apparently I love quoting sayings a lot – is: "Everything's difficult before it's simple." It's a little stupid but it's true. When you look at weapons in *Bulletstorm* after they've been designed and tested and prototyped, you might think, 'Yeah, this is a lovely solution', but it was blood, sweat and tears for months, if not years, to make sure every weapon is truly different.

And it's a sandbox-type shooter, very much in the player's hands. Does that preclude using a weapon as a puzzle-solver?
Absolutely. This is something I've been talking about with our guys. It was a hard battle, but I won. For example, we have this weapon, the Bouncer. We had a lot of prototypes where you were supposed to throw that ball into a pipe, then it appears on the other side of a fence and you explode it. But what happens if I don't have that weapon at that point in the game? It was solvable, yes, but that's not the point.

So instead of making all these puzzles, I said to the guys that my dream was basically to lose control of the game. It's very scary but that's what excited me about *Bulletstorm*. And I started to talk about *QuakeWorld* again, where the explosion from the rocket launcher hurt you and pushed you away. And the push-back was this cosmetic effect, but people abused it and that's how rocket-jumping was born. We wanted to do exactly the same, and we succeeded in that we have no control. Which is a pain in the ass when it comes to testing, by the way.

What will make *Bulletstorm* unique in an overcrowded FPS market?
The thing that's different about *Bulletstorm* is, yeah, it's SkillShot gameplay, but here's a different angle. When *Gears* was released, they introduced the cover system, and when you played a game without it, it felt like something was missing. So everyone accepted the formula and now everything uses it. It's been accepted and it works very well. I don't want to sound like a salesman for *Bulletstorm*, but I can honestly tell you there's a bit of that effect here. After you actually kill those enemies, you'll find that you have this true freedom on the battlefield, and you can play any way you want to.



BODYCOUNT



CODEMASTERS GUILDFORD STORMS THE BUILDING WITH THE MOST DESTRUCTIVE FIRSTPERSON SHOOTER SINCE THE GAME TO WHICH IT'S THE UNOFFICIAL SUCCESSOR

FORMAT: **360, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **CODEMASTERS**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **Q1**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E213**

After months of silence since an E3 reveal and the suspicious, presumably acrimonious departure of its creative director, *Bodycount* had all the hallmarks of a project in trouble. So it's comforting to see, walking around Codemasters' Guildford studio, that everything seems in order. *Bodycount* is beginning to emerge as a distinct personality, separated from the FPS mainstream by a colourful palette, an unconventional approach to visual design and an explosive, arcade-style approach to what a shooter should be.

The colour scheme is what differentiates it most obviously from the grey, dusty worlds of FPS realism. It's bright, but not gaudy – a subtle colour-wash gives skies and buildings noticeable but tasteful tints. In keeping with the emotional tone of the game's three acts, it shifts from yellows and greens through to sinister blues and purples and, finally, unsettling reds and yellows. The Network good-guy organisation, with its bright blue-and-yellow HUD elements and menu designs, is a strong aesthetic contrast to the game's main villains, the Target, whose design is all about straight lines, black armour and imposing architecture.

Bodycount's is an artist-designed world, from the architecture to the lighting to the dust detailing on the pistols. The idea is for it to form an environmental narrative; details like an abandoned truck crashed through a wall are intended to hint at moments and stories beyond the one that's explicitly being told. "The materials that the structures are made from in different parts of the world vary," explains art director **Max Cant**. "We're not just doing the sandbox thing where you make a sort of undulating flat plane and then plop down some houses and a car, etc. There are stages that have a lot of verticality in them, and others that are quite maze-like."

> "IT'S NOT RETRO IN ANY OF THE GAME MECHANICS, IT'S RETRO IN THE SENSE THAT WE'RE TRYING TO BUILD FUN INTO IT – WE'RE NOT GOING DOWN THIS ROAD OF TRYING TO APE REALISM AND GO GRITTY AND DEPRESSING"

Playing through a demo level – a multi-layered industrial complex somewhere in Africa packed with relatively unchallenging but numerous militia – it's clear that the game is far away from grim and gritty in its style of play, too. Downed foes erupt in a shower of ammo and 'intelligence' orbs that make a pleasant chime upon collection, and can be hoarded to pay for special abilities like temporary invulnerability or air strikes. Cover explodes into shards, shredded to pieces by weighty, visceral, exaggerated weaponry. It's plausibility rather than realism that's the guiding principle of *Bodycount*'s arsenal: these guns are noticeably detailed – something that particularly comes to light with their lingering reload animations – but they've all got at least 60 bullets in their clips.

The weapon design is as important to *Bodycount* as it was to *Black* before it. The arsenal is intended to feel expensive – why stop at military-shooter simulation when you can have chunkier, better-looking pieces that tear through walls? Powerful assault rifles judder the aiming reticule for a second or so before you bed into the recoil, encouraging sustained fire rather than controlled bursts. Instead of hanging back and clearing areas out, letting off a few shots whenever you see an enemy head poking above a wall, *Bodycount*'s arsenal and rapidly degrading cover pushes you towards the fray. Enemies, too, rush towards you rather than hiding; snipers discard their rifles in favour of shotguns if you make your way up to their nests. *Bodycount*'s AI still needs some

Above left: ***Bodycount*****'s unusual colour scheme is most obvious in its skies and a range of brightly clad enemies**

Above: If the guns seem to fill more of the screen than normal, it's because they're huge, carefully crafted things

balancing, and weapon spray and power isn't quite where it wants to be yet, but it has a very different rhythm of play when compared to last year's highest-profile shooters. Its environments are layered, circular, guiding you back through the same areas rather than from one end of a corridor-shaped level to another.



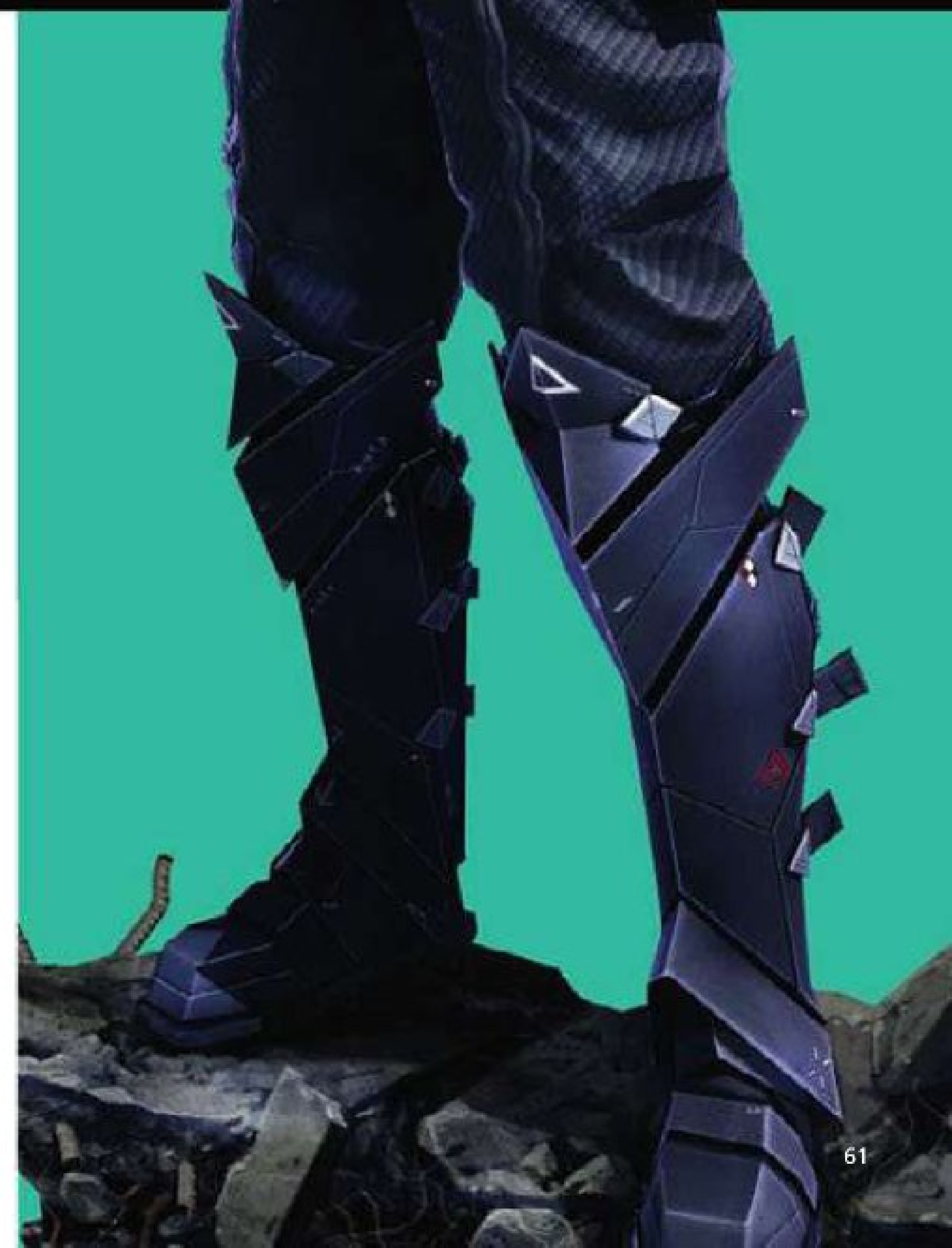


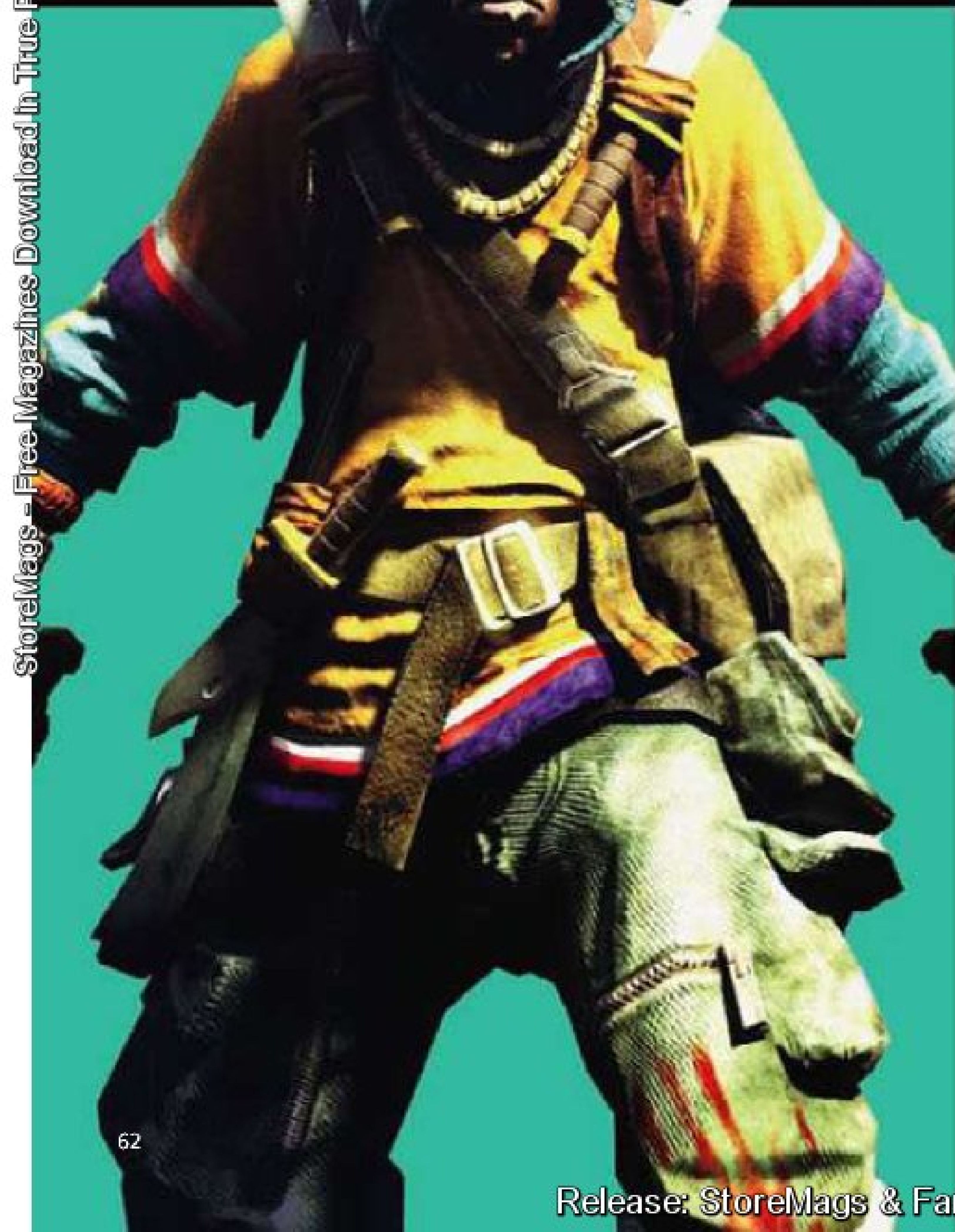
Inspired by the likes of Blade Runner, Garth Ennis, JJ Abrams and Lady GaGa, ***Bodycount*****'s prime objective isn't realism**

Damage done to buildings and walls is persistent, leaving you to make do with severely degraded cover the next time you pass through. The cover system is designed around destructibility – it doesn't stick you to walls that might disappear at any moment. Pulling the left trigger locks you into place, but you can still lean in any direction with the left stick to peek over or around a rapidly disintegrating structure.

There's a considerable difference, we're told, between the opening levels' amateurish militia and the hyper-organised Target soldiers that define the endgame. Enemy variety will be crucial if *Bodycount* is to avoid devolving into a shooting gallery once the novelty of powerful guns and destructible levels wears off. The concept artwork for Target technology certainly looks different – "like stealth weaponry if designed by Apple," as Cant puts it.

Looking at those bold colours, power-ups, wanton destructibility and arcade-style sensibilities, it's easy to see *Bodycount* as an expression of FPS fatigue as well as an answer to it. Is it perhaps a bit of a throwback? "It's not retro in any of the game mechanics, it's retro in the sense that we're trying to build fun into it – we're not going down this road of trying to ape realism and go gritty and depressing," says game director **Andy Wilson**. "If fun is retro, which





I think it actually is in a lot of videogames now, then that's what we're going for."

Q&A: Max Cant (art director) & Andy Wilson (game director), Codemasters

What are your feelings about where shooters stand artistically at the moment?

Max Cant: I've got nothing against the military look, but if you're coming into the market now with another firstperson shooter, then you're kind of morally obligated to do something different, just because it's all too much now. It's become the default. The easiest thing to do is strip all the light out and put a coloured lightbulb into a grey world. I really want to try and avoid that and work with colour, which is difficult, but worth trying.

Andy Wilson: Because everybody's at it, everything has a similar colour palette. And for us as well, it's not great to say to people: "We're making this game and it's going to be just like…" We wanted something totally unique. It's taken some extreme turns in places, but it's arrived in a really nice place.

How early on did the arcade-style design vision come through?

AW: Probably around four or five months into the project. We knew roughly what we wanted to do, but in terms of placing it along the scale between really grim and serious, and light and arcadey, we settled on the arcadey end of the spectrum, because the grittier end was just depressing. You don't want to spend two years up to your eyeballs building the kind of game that's just depressing to think about and to play. So we thought we'd have fun with it.

The thing is, just because it's arcade-like, that doesn't mean it has to be an airhead. The upgrade system, the tactical use of cover, the environment shredding, all those things make for a pretty superb, deep experience when it's all tied together – but there's no reason why you can't wrap that up with very arcade sensibilities and make it quite accessible. Just over a year ago, we settled on that style and it really seemed to have something.

Isn't there a good dose of realism in the gun designs, at least?

MC: If you look at a photo of a gun, it doesn't look like how it feels when you pick it up. We're more interested in trying to make it as powerful as it feels to actually hold one. You can attempt a photographic rendering style or hyper-realism, but it's probably not as satisfying as just over-dialing some of the elements. It's the sort of thing that you can take artistic licence on. A better, bigger, more powerful gun is just a better thing to play with.

AW: Our gun designer has fired a lot of real



SHRED TOGETHER

Codemasters hopes that shredding and the intelligence-orb-driven power-up system will make *Bodycount*'s multiplayer much more interesting than the standard deathmatch, the idea being that it's impossible to learn a map when players can create new lines of sight and blow up different walls every time they play. The strongest body-armour upgrade, meanwhile, lets you run through walls, making you capable of barreling through an entire building to shoot an opponent in the face. A progressive perks system is being discussed, but there's still division among the game's designers: some favour a more even playing field than *Call of Duty*'s experience-driven system.







Even though Stuart Black left partway through completing what was his pet project at Codemasters' Guildford studio, his influence still remains. *Bodycount* is the spiritual successor to *Black*, both games focusing on the destruction of their surroundings and what it feels like to wield a gun. Specialised AI classes change the pace (top); medics will revive recently dispatched comrades unless you take the initiative

weapons, and the thing is that it's never going to feel the same, so you actually have to really over-dial things to get it closer. His little phrase is "reality is a springboard," and it really is – why stop when it's feeling sim-like or accurate? We're not making a sim, we're making something arcadey in nature, so we can do what we want with it, keep playing with it until it's as good as possible.

MC: Yeah, hand grenades in real life are not that fun to watch. They're a bang and a lot of dust and then tinnitus.

> "WE OBVIOUSLY WANT TO FIND A PLACE OF OUR OWN WITH BODYCOUNT. VISUALLY IT'S PRETTY DIFFERENT. GAMEPLAY-WISE IT'S GETTING PRETTY DIFFERENT AS WELL. I CAN'T THINK OF ANYTHING COMPARABLE AT THE MOMENT"

What's the most important issue for the genre at the moment? Where should it go?

AW: I think the biggest thing in the FPS genre right now is trying to distance yourself from the hugely successful examples like *Call Of Duty* or *Battlefield*. We've seen recent examples where it doesn't work out so well if you just try to copy that and go one better. Really it's about diversifying, and trying to find something that hasn't been done before, or something that hasn't been done really well, and just push for that.

We've always said: do something relatively small and beautiful. Build something properly and polish the hell out of it; don't go super-wide. But also we obviously want to find a place of our own with *Bodycount*. Visually it's pretty different. Gameplay-wise it's getting pretty different as well. I can't think of anything comparable at the moment.

If *Call Of Duty* exists on another plane because of its profile, what do you see as *Bodycount*'s competition this year?

AW: We seem to have been lumped in with *Brink* and *Bulletstorm*. Visually they're both very bright and poppy. They've also not gone down the *COD* route, so we're seeing more examples, I think, of developers trying to find their own space that's not *Modern Warfare* or *Battlefield*. I would hope that when people actually get their hands on *Bodycount* they'll think, 'Yep, that's not really like anything else'.





Max Cant, art director, *Bodycount*



Andy Wilson, game director, *Bodycount*



VIDEOGAMES IN THE LAB: THE SCIENCE OF USABILITY

From unskippable cutscenes to galvanic skin response, we investigate the world of videogame user research

Difficulty spikes, unreliable checkpoints, context-sensitive buttons that might open a door, but might bounce a grenade into your lap instead: these things matter. "Every moment in a game, you're bleeding players," says **John Hopson**, Bungie's user research lead. "Hopefully, you're bleeding them as slowly as possible. The most powerful thing I ever did on *Halo* was make a graph showing how many players we lost each mission. We had these people: they bought the game, they wanted to play, and we failed them."

Usability testing didn't start with videogames. It started with product development of a more domestic stripe: with teapots, toasters and car dashboards. Although designers have always spared a thought for their audiences since the days of *Jet Set Willy* – it's hard to make even the simplest videogame without thinking of what the player's going to do or see from one second to the next – it's only become a serious issue in the games industry relatively recently. Yet with no bespoke track at GDC, no standardised terminology, and no agreed best

Illustration: Adam Nickel

practices, usability may be gaining respectability, but it's still one of the least understood aspects of design. That poses some interesting questions. How does the industry approach user research today, and why has something so fundamental waited so long to be taken seriously?

Usability is made up of two elements: user testing, which investigates whether people can understand how to play a game properly, and playtesting, which then looks at whether they're actually enjoying themselves. Playtesting has been taking place on an unofficial basis since *Spacewar*. User testing, however, has been far less common.

"The problem is that user testing is complex," says **Chris Viggers**, the development director at Blitz Games Studios. "It's about the psychology of how people interact with a computer and with different control systems. It's about what they're expecting out of a game and how they think it should react. You're working out how to factor it into the game, and making sure that testing sessions are as objective as possible when it comes to what kind of questions you ask. You can quite easily skew your own results by approaching your testers incorrectly."

That said, certain developers began thinking about usability a lot earlier than others. "Because Microsoft was a conventional software company, they were used to doing usability for Word and Office already," says Hopson, who worked for the platform holder prior to joining Bungie. "They just transferred that philosophy across. We had to bend the process around quite a bit, though. When you're testing whether a spellchecker works, you don't have to worry about whether it's fun."

Speaking of processes, while there are currently as many approaches to usability as there are developers, there's one golden rule everyone can agree on. "Start early," laughs **Dr Graham McAllister**, the director of Vertical Slice, the UK's first game usability studio. "Come to us earlier and we solve more problems. We almost always have fundamental changes to make and, at the moment, most companies come to us at the end. When they get our report and we say: 'Here are the five things that are absolutely critical and must be changed or there'll be an impact on the review score,' it may be too late."

"Now we do usability as soon as we can get something for people to play," says **Jason Avent**, a game director at Black Rock Studios, the creator of *Pure*. "That can sometimes mean it's not even first playable for the game: it's a prototype in XNA or Unity. That gives you enough data to make more committed choices. With *Pure*, we started user testing early. We had a fairly early version of a track with a couple of massive jumps in it, and just one guy on the track. We had some art, but it didn't look great. The most important thing was that we had the handling, the collision response, and the rider response. Those were the aspects we were testing. At that stage, you can change stuff, but as you go further and further it gets harder."

"We've seen many instances where players may not say anything about an issue, but their physiology can show us that they've reacted to a game element"

At its core, usability testing is fairly simple: developers bring people in to play their game, and then talk to them about their experiences. Increasingly, however, researchers are trying to look into the player's head a little more directly. Vertical Slice is one of the pioneers of the biometric approach, using diagnostic tools to dig deeper into user responses. "You've got an emotional spectrum," explains McAllister. "Think of it as a graph, with arousal – positive and negative excitement – on the Y axis, and then mood – happiness and sadness – on the X. Arousal can be measured by galvanic skin response, which we do by placing sensors on players' fingers, while we measure overall skin temperature to give us valance – whether a player



Jason Avent,
Black Rock Studios



Chris Viggers,
Bitz Games



Dr Graham McAllister,
Vertical Slice

Learning styles

While almost all usability testing makes some attempt to distinguish between skilled and unskilled testers, McAllister says that audiences are actually far more complex. "You have to take into account different ways of learning," he suggests. "Particularly when it comes to tutorials: you should always tell players how to do things more than one way. In some games, developers teach the rules in one form only – say, text. Some people want to read things, some people want to be shown things, and some people want to do it for themselves. There are three distinct styles of picking up information. If you can balance that out and subtly use the different ways that people learn, you can make a big difference."

Internal resistance

Some of the biggest hurdles user researchers have to get around are the design teams they're working with. "That was one of our worries at the start, that people would think we were there to ruin game design," admits McAllister. "We're actually there to help it. We think we can help people to be more creative. If we can show a team of 20 people saying that they don't understand a mechanic, they can come up with a better idea. One of our arguments is that we're better for creativity. We're not trying to dumb things down in any way. People aren't always receptive to usability. It's understandable: you're talking about someone's vision, something they've worked with for a long time. That's why we also show video evidence of what we're doing."

"There's a tendency to want to bring in usability late in the process," agrees Hopson. "Designers can feel that usability testing is giving their game a grade on how fun it is, so they'll often want to polish it as much as possible to give it the highest grade possible. They'll delay taking it to the usability lab. We're trying as much as possible to get past that mindset. It's less interesting to ask what the fun grade is for these missions, than to ask, 'OK, mission one is fun, mission two isn't – why is that?' The reason why we do all this testing is to give designers better tools to make decisions."



One of the reasons McAllister's team relies on biometric data is that people lie. "We wanted to test the shock value of the 'No Russian' level in *COD*," he says. "We asked for someone to come in, and made sure we'd picked someone who said they hadn't played the game before, and was easily offended. His body reaction was not what we expected: it was flat. Afterwards, he admitted he'd played it before. He was trying to tell us one thing, but his body couldn't lie"



is happy or sad. This is all still research, but we're already seeing, for example, skin temperature decreasing and an increase in galvanic skin response during combat in good FPS games – they seem to be aroused and happy."

Biometrics helps to pick up disparities between what players say and what they may actually think, but not everyone in the usability community is convinced. "We don't use biometrics pretty much at all," says Hopson. "However, we do look at the difference between what people say and what they do. If they say they love the shotgun, but then when we look through the data it shows they never pick it up, we know we have to investigate. It would be too strong to say that I consider the use of biometrics in game research to be snake oil, but it's close to how strongly I feel about it. To pick up a problem with biometrics that you couldn't pick up with other techniques, there'd have to be something in the game that isn't fun, which the player never said isn't much fun, never acts any differently, and which the experts watching them play don't pick up on. That's a very small category of problem."

"In some ways that's right – it's potentially a small set of issues that biometrics can identify," says McAllister. "But they're a different sort of issue than can be revealed with other methods. We use the same methods as Bungie also, of course – observing behaviour, listening to the player, interviews. But biometrics help us to identify how the player *feels* about the game. They also offer us the ability to identify the precise moment when the player reacted to gameplay elements, which helps us to counteract the problem of collecting general feedback. We've seen many instances where players may not say anything about an issue, or behave differently, but their physiology can show us that they've reacted to a game element. In other words, we can identify the precise second when the player felt something. We then interview the player afterwards about that precise moment."

Biometrics isn't the only controversial issue in user research; there's also the huge matter of where to draw your testers from to consider. "Initially we got guys in who weren't in our team,



"Usability had a huge effect on *Pure*," says Avent. "The most obvious thing is there aren't snags on any of tracks. It takes quite a lot of user testing to make sure that you'll never snag on anything. Then things like the rolling resets: there's a lot of frustration when people weren't expecting to be reset. Getting rid of that kind of stuff is a big deal. We started off with all kinds of different penalties, but we eventually became more and more lenient, because it's just not fun"

THE DIFFICULTY WITH DIFFICULTY

If user testing is so focused on removing frustration for players, is there a danger it might be helping to bleed games of their challenge?"I think that if you were deliberate with a choice to make a game that's bloody hard, like *Demon's Souls* [left], you'd still need usability to make the second-to-second experience better and refine the interface, and that testing wouldn't have to make the core game easier," says Avent. "So in *Demon's Souls*, whenever you die it's your fault and that's not frustrating, except for one level where the framerate can kill you because you fall off a cliff when there's too much going on. That framerate level should have been picked up in usability testing, because people have stopped having fun. You should still have games that will punish you ruthlessly, but it should always be because you made a mistake. It's repeatable, and you can test for that."

"This comes down to our relationship with the developer," suggests McAllister. "Say we evaluate a game and we write a report with 60 findings: these are the things we think you should change. It's completely down to their discretion to say whether they do that or not. So in each report, we have a link to the video file so they can see the problem. They can look at it and say, "Oh, yes, that's what we wanted to create." We're not game designers, and we know that game designers want things to be difficult sometimes. We don't want to make things easy."



John Hopson, Bungie



but were inside the company," explains Avent. "Then we got people who were in the same building, then we got friends of people at work, and then we got people on the street. You get more intelligent feedback from people who understand games, but it doesn't necessarily mean it's more usable. Sometimes insider knowledge pollutes it and sometimes it doesn't. You've just got to make a judgement. It's always important to have a few people in the room watching the tests so you can decide what to ignore and what to take on board."

"Getting the right audience is very important," agrees McAllister. "We have profiles on everyone we use for testing in our database. We know who's hardcore and who isn't, which games they've played, how many hours per week they play. We'd like to go further. We're thinking of psychometric testing to learn about their game styles. It's so clients can come to us and we can give them the right audience for their tests. It's one of the things that drives me mad about usability. People will say: '82 per cent of people feel like this,' and I'm thinking: 'Who were the 82 per cent?' I want to know much more about the person. We have a list of the big problems in usability – the stuff that's really hard to solve – and audience is right up there. In fact, understanding people is at the very top."

And even the right audience doesn't guarantee that you'll get the right data. "You need to focus the tests, and focus them on the things the designers are worried about," says Hopson. "The places where they'd taken a risk and they don't know how it's going to play out."

Viggers concurs with this point. "It's important to keep the sessions distinct: one session you'll look at control or menus, and you won't look at anything else. You keep doing that throughout the process, and try to get the results feeding back into the game as quickly as possible. Regression testing is crucial, too: expose a feature to the player, get feedback, make changes, and then expose the feature again to see what they think now. It's a great way of seeing if your changes are working, and if the problems are going away or whether they're just revealing new problems."

"Even after that, you get a player's view of what you've made, but it's all about interpretation," suggests Avent. "You can't listen to the solutions that people voice. You have to look deeper, at what they really mean, what they're really saying, and what's really making them unhappy. There's always interpretation involved when you're user testing, regardless of what methods you use, and it's crucial to never forget that."

With such knotty issues to consider, it becomes easier to understand why so many developers still put usability to one side entirely, deeming it too complex or too expensive to work into the production schedule. Avent believes that's a mistake. "You shouldn't be put off by usability. You really don't need all that high-end stuff all the time," he argues. "It's like levels of service. You can do the fundamentals very cheaply with your own staff and going out and finding people on the street. For 60 per cent of the testing that has to go on, that probably does it. For stuff like measuring fun and excitement and



The *Halo* series is the product of extensive usability testing at Microsoft's own facility, aiming to not only fine-tune the core game but also navigation of its extensive menu system. Multiplayer betas for *Halo 3* and *Reach* (pictured), marketed to gamers as being their chance to be a tester, rounded out an intensive programme of trials



TEACHING TO PLAY

Tutorials aren't just important when it comes to ensuring that games make sense. Coming at the very start of the experience, they crop up at the crucial point when new players are subconsciously evaluating the game. So why are they so often an afterthought?

"I could talk forever about this," says McAllister. "We're looking at tutorials at the minute across different games, and we've asked companies why tutorials are so bad. They say it's because they typically don't know what the game's going to contain until the last minute, so the tutorials are often made at the last minute. Tutorials could get rushed, in other words. It just seems so messed up: tutorials come in late sometimes, or they don't teach fundamental mechanics. This matters, because one of the questions we ask usability groups is 'What's unique about this game?' and often they struggle to tell us. Often, that's because they haven't used all of these features of the game. It ends up being a generic experience because you didn't teach the audience about your cool features."

"We've generally stopped doing explicit tutorials," says Hopson. "We try to train the players as they're playing. But we do ensure that by the time you meet enemies who shoot back, you've at least had to master some basic skills. You've learnt to point in the right direction, interact with objects, and fire your weapon. Those should be small steps you do along the way. We also don't assume that because you've done it once you really know it. A lot of those helpful popups will keep appearing until you've done something successfully a number of times."



The proliferation of new control methods like Kinect has made usability testing a priority at Blitz Game Studios, just so it can understand the ways players innately interact with them

fine-tuning, I think you need biometrics. It's here that those additional tools will really help."

"And even if you only user test late on, there's still a lot you can change," says Hopson. "But towards the end of development, what you're doing is parameter tweaks. You can make the guns fire faster, you can make something more powerful or a little less powerful, you can move things around in the level. You can't redesign an environment, but you can put a pile of ammo in the middle of the floor. Even at the late stage, there's still something you can do."

of games that sold under one million, and there's no correlation about quality – some got very good scores, some got very bad scores. But there is a correlation between all the games that sell over that amount. They all had 80 per cent and above on Metacritic, more or less. It seems there's a correlation between reviews and buyers, and usability matters to reviewers."

For Viggers, meanwhile, Blitz's user research was sparked in part by changes in hardware. "What's really kicked it off for us, and a lot of people, is that the Wii came out, which had a unique control system," he says. "We did a Wii launch title,

"People will say: '82 per cent of people feel like this,' and I'm thinking: 'Who were the 82 per cent?' I want to know much more about the person"

So what's driving the industry's sudden engagement with players and their myriad frustrations with games? "I think people are starting to see that if a game doesn't get a good Metacritic rating, there's going to be trouble," says McAllister. "We can't affect marketing, but we can work alongside that. I recently saw some research based on a study of 1,700 PS2 games, in North America only. The results said that for a game to sell one million units, you had to get at least 60 on Metacritic. No PS2 game that ever got below that went on to sell over a million. People see this as evidence of the marketing ceiling. What the researchers ended up with is a large number

and we had no idea how people were even going to hold the controller, let alone know how they'd react to onscreen prompts. We were very much aware that we had to go back to the player to see how they were just going to relate to it. Now with touchscreen phones and Kinect and Move, every platform has a different – and often untested – way of interacting. Doing a launch title for Kinect, we had no other games to look at to see how people were going to react. We had to start thinking about usability. We had to go outside of the studio, and just bring in real people and test out what they think they'd do, and what they'd expect to happen with the hardware. We know how these pieces of hardware work from a technical level; a user on the street will just approach it in a much more natural way, and we need to capture that."

"The other thing that's pushing usability in the industry is free-to-play games," suggests Hopson. "You're getting people playing who haven't paid you any money yet, so every usability problem that stops people from playing has a direct impact on the bottom line. It's always been difficult to make a return-on-investment argument for usability: how does making this



INTERFACE ISSUES

As with tutorials, a game's user interface has a nasty habit of being left until the last minute as feature sets get redefined. **Phil Cox**, lead artist at Playground Games, and the man responsible for the UIs of *Grid* (above) and *Dirt*, thinks that's a mistake. "For most games, the menus are going to be the player's first experience, and so it's vital that the quality levels are up there with the rest of the product," he argues. "With games becoming larger and with things like multiplayer coming to the fore, a significant proportion of the player's time is spent in menus – selecting their next gameplay experience and being given feedback about their performance, objectives and goals. As games become more complex, it's really important to make sure that features are properly communicated, particularly as few people read manuals these days. There's no point having a great feature if it isn't communicated properly. In the past I've worked on games from which game elements have been removed because the means of communicating them to the player was considered too cumbersome."

Ultimately, good UI design is about knowing where to focus a player's attention. "A well-designed menu should not feel complicated or deep," says Cox. "Each screen should be communicating just one key thing. The best approach is to minimise elements, making the choices clear and obvious. If you have to add text to the screen to help explain how it works, then there's probably something wrong with how you designed it. You could create the most amazing-looking menus in the world, but if they're too awkward or confusing then you've got a problem. That said, I think unimaginative menus are missing an opportunity to improve the game experience for the player. Presentation is what helps to differentiate the game in a crowded marketplace, and the UI is at the forefront of that."

"In the old days of game development, designers just designed for themselves. That's why games used to be hard"

mission better translate into money? But with free-to-play, there's a very direct line between the two issues."

"In the old days, designers just designed for themselves," agrees Avent. "That's why games used to be hard: the team was really good at them because they balanced for themselves. I don't think the audience complained so much, either. They literally didn't have the forums. But you didn't have so many different alternatives for entertainment, either. You just accepted there's this amazing new medium for entertainment, but it's hard. Not any more."



Dead Space's clever incorporation of its menus and other information into the gameworld creates its own usability issues. Is the text legible? Are the menus as easy to navigate as traditional types? Even expert innovation needs testing

And so, slowly, studios around the world are beginning to involve the player in the design of games, bringing in playtesters, listening to feedback, and building usability into production schedules. "That's something we're moving to: testing with every milestone of the game," says Viggers. "Testing all the features and getting that feedback flowing throughout the game. It does become an overhead, but the proof is there using it this year with Kinect and Move: sessions with usability have forced us to make large changes, and we've been able to do that because of where we are in the cycle of development. That's proved to us how vital it is that we do this kind of regular testing."

"Usability and marketing should complement each other," argues McAllister. "Take a high-profile game like *Black Ops*. I don't know what the marketing budget was, but let's say it's $10 million. Now, I'm betting the usability budget was fractions of that. When people talk about the difficulty of building usability into the production schedule, I always think about how marketing's already an accepted part of the process. You wouldn't start development without a marketing director, but projects often start without usability budgets." He laughs. "Ultimately, we just have to get better at explaining ourselves. Some people think we're QA, some people think we're market research, and we're not: we're there to present the player's perspective before your game is on the shelf."



DESIGNERS ON DESIGN

What do developers make of some of gaming's more irritating quirks?

UNSKIPPABLE CUTSCENES

Adam Parsons: "I think unless they're short and essential then cutscenes need to be skippable for those who want immediate action. But there is something to be said for setting the scene: not everything is going to be an adrenaline rush from the first second."

John Hopson: "The problem with letting players skip cutscenes is that they miss a lot of information about what's going on in the game when they skip them, and become confused about their objectives and the story. In some of the past games I've worked on, we've made a point of allowing players to skip all cutscenes while simultaneously making the same information available elsewhere. It works, but it's a significant commitment on the part of the studio. I think the right question is: 'Why are people skipping cutscenes, and how do we make cutscenes people actually want to watch?'"

Jason Avent: "My general feeling is that cutscenes are a bit old-fashioned, and that stories should be relayed to you as you play, like in *Half-Life 2* or *BioShock*."

SAVE-POINT PLACEMENT

JH: "This is an area where data-mining can contribute a lot to design, because you can collect metrics on the time and number of deaths between save points and figure out where the experience is breaking down."

HARDER DIFFICULTY LEVELS THAT HAVE TO BE UNLOCKED

AP: "You shouldn't have to play on normal to get to the hard setting. Sometimes, though, there are development reasons for adding higher levels as DLC, purely down to the fact that super-hard difficulty takes much longer to test."

GAMES WITHOUT HUDS

AP: "The industry sometimes tries to be too clever for its own good, but we do need to experiment and then focus test what we've done to see if a new idea works or not. Then we can engage the player more in the experience rather than being reminded it's not real with onscreen energy bars. *Dead Space* is a great example of cleverly displaying health."

POOR SIGNPOSTING

AP: "Signposting is the bane of our lives, as it's so subjective. Too much and we become patronising, too little and the player misses key information and wanders aimlessly until they're shot. The player needs to know where the objectives are and in what order they need to achieve them. We can't punish them if they don't know that information."

MANDATORY TUTORIALS

JH: "Getting the right amount of tutorial is really tricky. If tutorials and popups are too easy to miss, players miss them, then get frustrated at not understanding what's going on. If they're too intrusive, they annoy experienced players and make the game feel like it's on training-wheels. I'm a big fan of the solution we used in *Halo*. Our training system doesn't keep telling you how to pick up a gun if you've already done it successfully. However, if you've done it only once then never again, the system will remind you. The system adapts to the player, giving novices some extra help and giving experts a break. It's also important to remember that half of all players are below average, and the game and its makers have just as much responsibility to those players as to the experts."



CASE STUDY: CODEMASTERS

With *Operation Flashpoint: Red River* (above), Codemasters faces a tricky usability problem: delivering an authentic military sim that doesn't alienate a more casual audience. Creative director **Sion Lenton** and executive producer **Adam Parsons** explain their approach.

When did you start thinking about usability?
Adam Parsons: *Flashpoint*'s a great game, but it could be mystifying at times with the amount of things you've got onscreen. I wanted to lower the barrier, and usability was the key. We looked at the comments the community had, and we looked at other shooters' controls, and we realised people might not want to learn a new system. We also looked at the mechanics that were on the screen to remove any ambiguity, but still achieve the same rich fighting and ordering system.

What's your methodology?
AP: Prototypes, evaluation, iteration, then building it in-game and iterating again.
Sion Lenton: The key to good testing has been getting cold testers in, and we've found that it's best to be specific in the areas you want feedback on.

How has user testing changed the game?
AP: Immediacy. If it takes three steps to get something done, can we get that down to one step? We've done that with radial menus, slot-based inventory, and one-button healing.

Is usability only about streamlining things?
SL: No, the results will always surprise you. You ask: "Did you find giving a suppression order easy?" And you'll get back: "We didn't even know you could give suppression orders." The data can't do everything, so you still have to choose your battles. Making an in-depth tutorial system is a lot of work, but if you've simplified the controls, you're simplifying any potential tutorial at the same time.

Is there tension between design and usability teams?
SL: It's a healthy tension. It's all about whether can we change things but still be true to the game. That's our learning curve. It sounds like a cop-out, but you've always got the ability to optionalise things. It's a funny mantra that says if you give people choice to optionalise, you're a weak designer. *Flashpoint* is *Flashpoint* because of the decisions you make. What usability helps with is in allowing people the tools they need to get to the good parts. You don't design games for yourself, you design them for the public.



CASE STUDY: HAND CIRCUS

Micro-studios can live or die by usability. **Simon Oliver** explains how his company, Hand Circus, gets by without the budgets involved in large-scale development.

How do you approach usability?
It involves taking things out and streamlining the remaining elements. We're big advocates of prototyping. The *Rolando* games [above], and our next game, *Okabu*, have been subject to a great deal of prototyping: exploring mechanics that we thought would be fun, and throwing out whatever doesn't work. A lot of stuff ends up on the cutting-room floor because it's just too convoluted, or the amount it adds to the game is weighed down by a complex mechanic that is hard to explain.

How does usability fit into production?
In the preproduction and early production phases, it's generally been very informal. As we progress to a milestone, we'll focus on testing with friends. Towards the end of the production schedule, we'll employ broader, more formal testing with focus groups. The early stages revolve around a real stream-of-consciousness commentary on the player's experience, being very open about frustrations or mechanics that feel a little clunky. For the *Rolando* games we brought in larger focus groups for a much more detailed survey. Being able to go round a roomful of players, watching where they get stuck, seeing how they react to hints and instructions, is very beneficial.





WINNING STREAK

ARC SYSTEM WORKS HAS WORKED HARD TO EARN A SEAT AT THE TABLE OF JAPAN'S BEST FIGHTING GAME CREATORS. BUT WITH ARCADES IN DECLINE, WHERE NEXT FOR YOKOHAMA'S PRETTIEST CONTENDER?

It's the most beloved of all story arcs: the newcomer working against the odds to deal a knockout blow to the competition; the underdog turned champion. Since the release of its first original fighting game, *Guilty Gear*, in 1998, Arc System Works has worked tirelessly to earn its place among the Japanese fighting game elite, barging its way into a crowded room swinging.

The studio's various series now stand shoulder to shoulder with the finest efforts of Capcom and SNK. Indeed, *Street Fighter IV* director Yoshinori Ono directly attributes the 3D style of his genre-reviving game to Arc's *Battle Fantastia*, a JRPG-styled fighting game that first perfected the 2D-made-3D style.

Founded in 1988 by Minoru Kidooka, a young salaryman who left his position as a planner at Sega to strike out on his own, Arc stands for 'Action', 'Revolution' and 'Challenge'. They are three words that define not only the company's approach to game-making, but also the cyclical churn of the genre in which it chiefly operates. And yet

the specialisation in fighting games for which the company is known was something of a happy accident. When the second generation of staff joined the company in the early '90s, at the height of the fighting game boon, Kidooka perceived a passion for the genre in them that he wanted to explore.

Three years later, the first *Guilty Gear* game was born, a pin-sharp 2D fighting game full of screen-filling sword attacks soundtracked by distorted guitars and hard-rock drums. Released just as the world was beginning to embrace 3D, the timing appeared disastrous, anything 2D seeming culturally outdated and anachronistic. Likewise, the decision to release the game on Sony's PlayStation instead of Sega's Saturn, the latter system far better suited to 2D graphics, seemed terminal.

But in the tradition of all the most successful fighting games, Arc went to where the players were, and the result was the launch of one of the most successful fighting game franchises of modern times, with no less than ten further entries in the series in the decade since its debut in 1998.

As with any niche developer, Arc System Works recognises the need to diversify its portfolio in these tough times. While *BlazBlue*, with its jaw-dropping 2D visuals, may look like a replacement for *Guilty Gear*, it represents a concerted attempt to appeal to fighting game newcomers without alienating the old guard.

Meanwhile, Arc is taking tentative steps into WiiWare and DSiWare casual game development, a world away from the frame-counting specialism of its core audience. Here, we talk with some of the company's brightest creatives to find out how they got to where they are today, and where the story arc is taking them next.

IN WITH THE NEO

Arc occupies the entire fifth floor of a small building close to the new Shin-Yokohama station in Yokohama. An open-plan office, there are no dividers to separate the various roles in the company. Everyone shares the same space. In contrast to salaryman culture, staff are encouraged to take breaks, and, whenever possible, the day ends at six o'clock in the evening. Perhaps most indicative of the company's progressive attitude is that it promotes women to its highest ranks, with *Battle Fantasia* director Emiko Iwasaki being one of the few women to rise to that level in the Japanese game industry.

THE FINAL BOSS

Arc MD **Minoru Kidooka** (above) left his job as a planner at Sega in 1988 to strike out on his own. Since then, he's seen games change dramatically, and his company with it. We ask him about his past, present and future dreams.

After two decades in the business, do you look back and feel as though you've achieved all of what you set out to?
It's been hard work and it very much still is. But as you say, we're still here and operating. For me it's not a question of achieving a final goal or arriving at a destination, but rather being able to maintain my passion – creating games that we think are relevant.

Why is the company so involved in WiiWare and DSiWare development right now?
We've achieved success with the fighting game genre but I knew the company couldn't just focus on that. Our fighting game team was in good control of its work, leaving me able to establish a separate side of the company that I would direct personally. Through this, I returned to our roots – smaller teams working on smaller projects. The gaming landscape is changing and we need to adapt with it.

The only problem with this is that the split in focus has created an invisible wall in the company. We have people in charge of our hardcore titles on one side and those that are developing more casual, online-oriented stuff on the other. My objective is to create common ground in the middle, to create bridges between both.

Is there a particular hardware platform that you feel more comfortable with?
I think the arcade is the platform that's simplest to understand. You can forecast revenues looking at how many people come to play and how many credits they spend. You don't have to spend time and resources on promotion and communication, at least not to the same level as in the consumer market. It's really the simplest market: you make a game, release it and have immediate feedback from users. I'm still very much dedicated to arcades.

How do you select the concepts that will be taken forward and made into games?
We are very Japanese in the sense that there are no clear procedures or rules. A lot of it comes down to feel for me: whether I think something is going to be fun or interesting. Sometimes it's clear that an idea needs to be given time to mature.

With *Battle Fantasia*, Arc delivered its first and only 3D fighting game for the arcade. Why haven't you done more projects in 3D?
We'll absolutely do more 3D projects in the future. But we're a small company and we must allocate resources to projects as they come into development. We have *Guilty Gear* and *BlazBlue* as our star franchises. *Battle Fantasia* didn't achieve the commercial success we hoped for. We're not pressured to go for 3D because our focus isn't realism. To be honest, there's no point going after the franchises that are already well positioned in the 3D segment of the fighting world. We simply don't have the resources to go after those and that would force us into going for more realism in our games. It's just not the best way for us. So, for now, we think 2D is better. But that doesn't mean we won't make 3D games in the future. *BlazBlue* looks like a 2D game but we integrated a lot of 3D processes into its development. So we're continuously researching 3D. It's just about finding ways to integrate these techniques with our creative philosophy.

Have you noticed any differences between Japanese and western fighting game players?
I attended an event in the UK with a tournament and I couldn't perceive any differences between Japanese and foreign players. They even look the same and have the same type of bags! I think seeing that helped me realise that our games can break out of Japan. I mean, there's no reason we can't reach overseas users, and that's a comforting idea.

How do you feel about the way the Japanese videogame industry has been criticised for a lack of creativity lately?
I'm not aware of these things, to be honest. I have so much on my hands already. But it's true that our industry isn't doing very well. Japan is a country that has too many ways of entertaining itself. Combine that with an ageing population that has less time to play videogames or that plays in different places, not necessarily at home, and decline seems inevitable.

"I BELIEVE THAT THE DAYS OF BOXED PRODUCTS ARE NEARLY OVER – PERHAPS SOONER THAN WE THINK. IT WILL FORCE DEVELOPERS ON TO PLATFORMS THAT ARE VERY DIFFERENT FROM THE USUAL CONSOLES"

How do you see your company in the future?
I firmly believe that the days of boxed products are nearly over – perhaps sooner than we think. This will force developers on to platforms that are very different from the usual consoles: phones, tablets and so on. That is why we're so active on WiiWare and DSiWare. What we're learning today, I'd like to use in creating a bridge with some of our star franchises like *Guilty Gear* in the future. But I need to overcome that invisible wall first.







A BLAZE OF

Developed to replace the *Guilty Gear* series and usher in a new generation of fans, a great deal of Arc's fighting game hopes and dreams rest on 2D fighter *BlazBlue*'s good-looking shoulders. Director **Takeshi Yamanaka** (left) and producer **Toshimichi Mori** (right) explain their aspirations for the trilogy, now two games in.

How did the *BlazBlue* project originate?
Toshimichi Mori: I had felt for a while that the *Guilty Gear* series was growing somewhat stagnant. Be it due to the game systems or the characters, I felt like a reset was what the series needed. We'd reached a point where we were debating whether to include a particular move that had a two- to three-frame window or not. If you were unable to master it, you wouldn't be able to rise to the top of the *Guilty Gear* community and take part. I realised then that we'd just gone too far with it. *BlazBlue* was the perfect chance to try something different, something simpler. The challenge was doing it in such a way as to not alienate *Guilty Gear*'s already existing fans, and to build the new system in a way that the audience could easily identify with.

How did you seek to strike that balance?
TM: It's been a long and painful process. We tried various sets of characters and systems, first basing our work on things that were developed in previous games. The programmer was a former *Guilty Gear* expert so they were able to say which elements would satisfy the fans. As for the game balance, we're constantly tweaking it. But to get to the point where we felt we had something that could work, we spent around six months in core development.

How difficult is it to deliver those HD 2D graphics in a 16:9 aspect ratio?
TM: Honestly, you have no idea. The artists don't get any rest. It may just be me, but I believe that when the environments look great, the entire game follows. In our game we put a huge amount of attention and work into the backdrops, but to achieve this level of detail we went through three different approaches. It was painful. To begin with I made the art team try a full 3D approach. I wasn't happy. Then we tried a full 2D approach, and that was no better. It was only with the third attempt that things started to feel right. Even then, I made the artists redo all of the textures again. They were pissed at me for, like, nine months.

What is so appealing about fighting games?
Takeshi Yamanaka: It's not about systems so much as the fight itself. You find fewer of these kinds of experiences in gaming today. I think the Wii brought a lot to videogaming but you don't have that stark

BlazBlue: Continuum Shift debuted in Japanese arcades in 2009, and arrived on PS3 and 360 in 2010. As well as being available in coin-op, PS3 and 360 flavours, the first game in the series, *Calamity Trigger*, is also available on PSP

GLORY

win or lose situation, quick and intense bouts after which there's a clear winner and a loser. That's appealing. So is the community that grows around a fighting game, and the subsequent rise to stardom of experts who become masters of one game or a character. Players talk to one another, exchange hints and advice. It's really the inclusive nature of the arcade culture that I'm drawn to.

TM: The arcade might not be the booming place it used to be but I don't get the sense that there are any fewer fighting game players than there have been before. I think that's an incorrect perception. Of course there are franchises that aren't as popular as they used to be, but the audience is still there.
TY: There certainly aren't as many releases, but the audience is still here and hungry for great experiences – just look at how they flocked to *Street Fighter IV*. Overseas, I have the feeling that the fighting game genre isn't as developed as it is in Japan, but it's growing again thanks to *Street Fighter IV*. So this is our chance.

"IT WAS ONLY WITH THE THIRD ATTEMPT THAT THINGS STARTED TO FEEL RIGHT. EVEN THEN, I MADE THE ARTISTS REDO ALL OF THE TEXTURES AGAIN. THEY WERE PISSED AT ME FOR, LIKE, NINE MONTHS"

Were you tempted to take the game in a direction that would appeal to the west?
TM: Absolutely not. If you want to make a game that appeals to the west, you might as well have westerners doing it. Personally, I don't view users according to their nationality, but rather as gamers. I make games for people who like them. If there are people who like fighting games with Japanese-animation-style motions and a fantasy setting, I'm making the game for them. I don't understand why some of us in the industry want to draw a line between the Japanese and overseas industries. I only see gamers, with various tastes.

How do you view the fighting game scene as it exists in Japan today?

Do you see *BlazBlue* becoming a franchise like *Guilty Gear*?
TM: There are a few versions I'd like to release or test, but personally I'd like to try new things, and not just 'version up'.
TY: Making fighting game sequels is definitely not an easy road to take. You need to do new things that interest both arcade operators and players. *BlazBlue* was announced as a trilogy. Right now, we want to finish it in the best possible way that we can. After that, who knows?



GUILTY PLEASURE

Arc's flagship series *Guilty Gear* spearheaded the studio's move into 2D fighting games, establishing what would become the company's most successful franchise. We talk with creator and producer **Daisuke Ishiwatari** (right) about the series' birth, and the state of the arcade industry it's left behind.

How did *Guilty Gear* come into existence?
While at university I was mulling over where fighting games could potentially go next. At that point the genre was almost entirely based around martial arts or boxing. I wanted to create a combat game drawn from the anime tradition, one less focused on realism than fantasy. When I joined Arc after leaving university, this was the idea I brought to the table.

How was the idea received?
In those days, the PlayStation was seen as a weak 2D machine, especially in comparison to Sega's Saturn, which was really viewed as the go-to platform for 2D fighting games. I remember I was told that I chose the wrong platform and that 2D animation of the standard I wanted to achieve simply wasn't possible on the hardware. But I was convinced it could be done and our CEO said that if I was sure, then I had to go for it and try. Without Kidooka-san's faith in me, the game would have never happened.

Why were you so set on making the game for Sony's hardware?
At that time, the PlayStation was already gaining an advantage over its rivals in terms of userbase, and I believed that it simply made sense to develop for the platform that had a bigger market share. I wanted to reach as many users as possible.

What made you opt for the hi-res 2D style?
Creating pin-sharp 2D graphics was the only way we could get our game noticed in the market. We were essentially working at four times the level of definition of rival 2D fighting games at the time – closer to what we'd see as HD resolution these days – and the sheer number of dots the artists had to draw for each character was staggering. It was a marathon and many of the staff began to lose focus and motivation due to the sheer bulk of artwork. But how else could we stand out from Capcom and SNK's heavyweight games?

Did you ever feel like it was an impossible mission to complete?
Personally, I didn't. The pressure was primarily on the art staff. I had to field an awful lot of complaints. Many were saying: "This is impossible!" But I was that cold-blooded guy who told them: "OK, I heard you. Just do it." Looking back, I'm humbled by the huge effort the team made and what they achieved.

When did you begin to notice that the series was finding widespread success?
I think it was when we released the second game into arcades, *Guilty Gear XX*. That's when we first felt how support had grown for the series. People acknowledged our visual mastery with the first game, but that had been my first development and there were lots of things I needed to learn. *Guilty Gear XX* was a popular hit because of the lessons I'd learned. It was able to marry the high level of visuals with a much better understanding of the arcade.

What's your opinion of the current state of the arcade fighting game?

"THE PRESSURE WAS PRIMARILY ON THE ART STAFF. MANY OF THEM WERE SAYING: 'THIS IS IMPOSSIBLE!' BUT I WAS THAT COLD-BLOODED GUY WHO TOLD THEM: 'OK, I HEARD YOU. JUST DO IT'"

What were your influences with the game?
Of course, I enjoyed *Street Fighter II*. It was the big game in the arcade at the time and everyone I knew played it. But the moment I first knew I wanted to make a fighting game was when I played SNK's *Fatal Fury Special*. I think I was more inspired by the things I couldn't do in those games than the things that I could. For instance, I'd wonder why I couldn't hit an opponent when they were down and lying on the ground, or why I couldn't continue to fight while I was in the air. These were very simple questions, but they formed the basis of what I wanted *Guilty Gear* to embody.

Street Fighter IV is undeniably a classic game. It may not represent a new sort of fighting game, but the visual impact of the experience is huge. Moreover, the game is supremely well-balanced. But for me, the most important factor right now for getting new players in is the game's visuals. I think this is the key to keeping the genre alive. *Virtua Fighter* needs to find that sort of flourish; *Tekken* too. Neither of those games look distinct enough to maintain their current popularity. There's more of a challenge than ever to bring new things into the mix for arcade developers, and not only has the workload increased but each team member has to take on more diversified tasks. Ultimately, arcade game development is one of the highest-risk propositions in game making today.



The *Guilty Gear* series gathered steam with the release of *Guilty Gear XX* (aka *X2*), which has been released in a dizzying variety of permutations, the native arcade iterations joined by various PS2/Xbox/Wii/PC ports











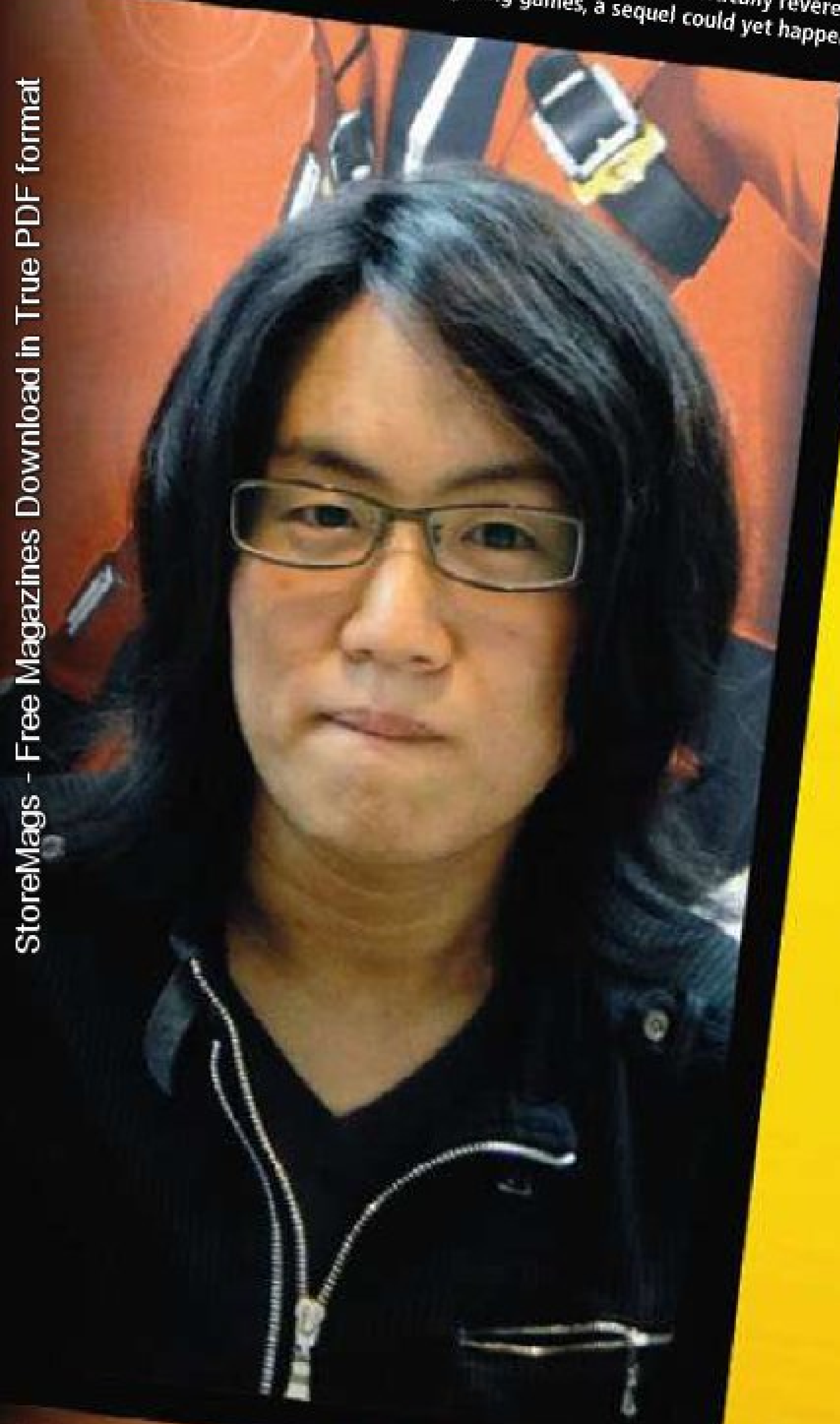








Released as a coin-op in 2007, *Battle Fantasia* was ported to PS3/360 in 2008, reaching Europe in 2009. Though it's not as critically revered as many of Arc's other fighting games, a sequel could yet happen



FIGHTING FANTASY

With its cutesy, stylised fantasy characters and JRPG visual trappings, *Battle Fantasia* stands out not only from the rest of Arc's catalogue, but also the genre it inhabits. Producer **Takuro Kayumi** (below left) explains how fantasy became reality for the game that inspired *Street Fighter IV*.

Where did the idea for such a different sort of fighting game originate?
Emiko Iwasaki, a female artist working at Arc at the time, had written a design document for a fantasy fighting game. She showed it to us at a time when we were considering our next move in the arcade and it seemed a good fit for both us and our publisher, Taito.

The game is very different in approach to the core 2D fighting games Arc is known for – how did you settle on its cute 3D style?
In terms of the visuals, Iwasaki-san should take full credit. The game very much represents her art style. In terms of the game's systems, though, we were interested in delivering something entirely new. We ascertained that, most of the time, you have a clear line between the 2D and 3D fighting worlds. Users of 3D fighters like *Virtua Fighter* often don't see the appeal in 2D fighters, and vice versa. With *Battle Fantasia* we wanted to create a game that felt 2D and 3D, appealing to both of those audiences at the same time.

What was the reaction of Arc's core fans?
There's been a trend in recent years towards combo-based fighting games. Iwasaki-san and I both wanted to buck this trend and revisit an older approach that didn't focus so wholly on combos. The game was well-received among players who shared our point of view. In particular, we had a lot of positive feedback about the art and designs, people even going to far as to say we should try to create an RPG using these characters.

Does that explain why there's no sequel?
You know, we're not a very big company so we have limited resources. That means that if you want to make a game, you have to take a ticket and get in line. It doesn't mean that no sequel is coming. We just don't have the capacity to develop too many projects at the same time. Also, we have to keep caring for our star franchises. I'd say we're fortunate being able to deliver these kinds of original titles from time to time.

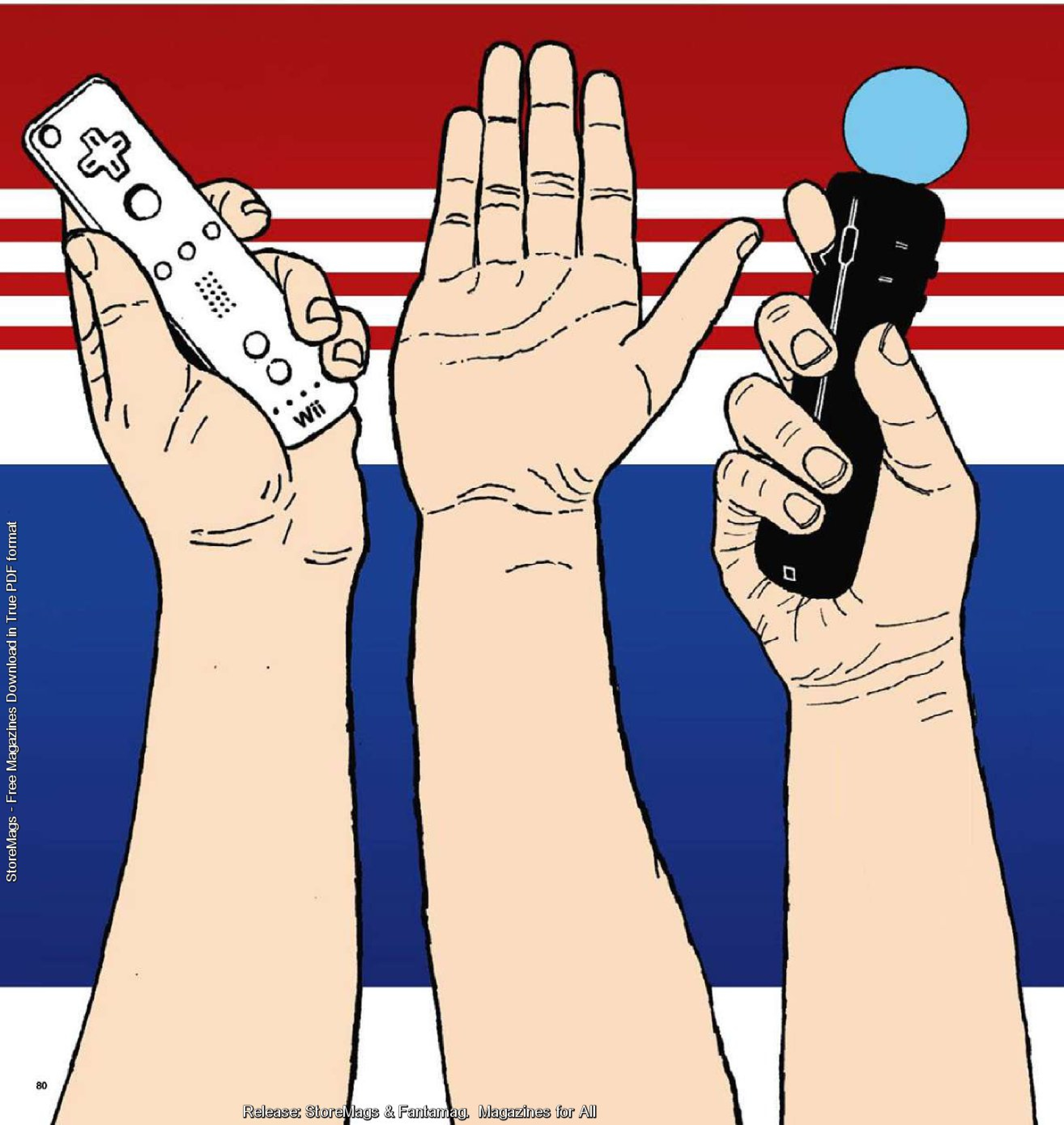
How difficult was it to have a project that bucks market trends accepted by the company?
The decision of whether a game goes into production or not at Arc rests entirely with our MD, Kidooka-san. While he naturally takes a business-minded approach to projects he green-lights, this isn't everything for him. Oftentimes it's his instinct as a creator that drives his decision. Of course, there's a great deal of discussion that goes into the decision-making process, but he's not afraid to surprise the company's fans if he feels something is worthwhile.

Capcom's Yoshinori Ono paid tribute to your game as an inspiration in the making of *Street Fighter IV* – what was your reaction to that?
It's funny because *Street Fighter III* was really key in the making of *Battle Fantasia*. *Battle Fantasia* was the result of Iwasaki-san and I imagining what a sequel to that game could have looked like, so there's a certain amount of irony in Ono's comments. We're huge fans of Capcom's fighters, of course, so it's also very flattering. When we saw *Street Fighter IV* for the first time, we felt as though many of the features we couldn't do or include in *Battle Fantasia* were in that game. We were in awe of it, to be honest, so when Ono-san cited our game as a source of inspiration in its making, we were overjoyed. You have no idea how much that meant.

"STREET FIGHTER III WAS REALLY KEY IN THE MAKING OF BATTLE FANTASIA. BATTLE FANTASIA WAS THE RESULT OF IWASAKI-SAN AND I IMAGINING WHAT A SEQUEL TO THAT GAME COULD HAVE LOOKED LIKE"

For a modern fighting game, *Battle Fantasia* is an accessible experience – how did you achieve that balance?
Most hardcore fighting games focus on speed and intense melees. Using our knowhow in 2D combined with the flexibility that 3D offers, we worked carefully to achieve clarity for newcomers. For instance, collision was an issue so we made it very clear that two objects were separated by making sure that polygons wouldn't fuse at any point during the game. Also, 2D often limited us in the type of motion we could deliver; 3D opened up many opportunities in terms of characters rotating. The same care went into controls. By applying a more relaxed pace to the fighting, we're able to level the playing field a little between experts and newcomers to make the experience fun for both. It's more of a *Street Fighter*-style approach, I'd say.

What were the main lessons you took away having developed the game?
I'd say everything. The entire process was a learning experience. We had no 3D engine in-house when we started the project, so the first year was spent just developing that. As a result, today, we have far greater knowhow.


Wii

A CALL TO ARMS

INSIDE THE MOTION-CONTROL REVOLUTION THAT HAS REWRITTEN THE RULES OF GAME DEVELOPMENT

Big changes in videogames only sometimes come in the form of heralded new technological advances. Other innovations, like the analogue stick, quietly become as inseparable from our conception of videogames as the one-button joystick once was. Motion control has yet to become synonymous with gaming in the same way, but it could well be on that path. As of November 4, 2010, every platform holder has motion control as a significant (and expensive) part of their console strategy. The Kinect launch, following hundreds of millions spent on advertising and more than a year of hype, was the closest thing to a new console launch the videogame industry has seen in close to half a decade. Only now, four years after Nintendo's Wii introduced the wider world to motion-based gaming, are its effects on developers and gaming's audience starting to become clear.

Along with the DS touchscreen, motion control is held responsible for expanding gaming's appeal to a broader market, but it has also thrown up substantial challenges for developers struggling to come to grips with a new type of interface design. And, in widening the gaming audience, motion control has also split it down the centre, into casual and core players. Right now, games that straddle the divide, incorporating motion control into more traditional genres, seem increasingly rare.

If motion control has changed the world – and looking at the scale of investment in the technology, as well as the millions of Wii Remotes, Kinect sensors and Move controllers that have already been sold, it's impossible to argue otherwise – why has this happened? How are developers coping? And will motion control be an expected part of every hardware release from now on, or is it a trend that's burning itself out?

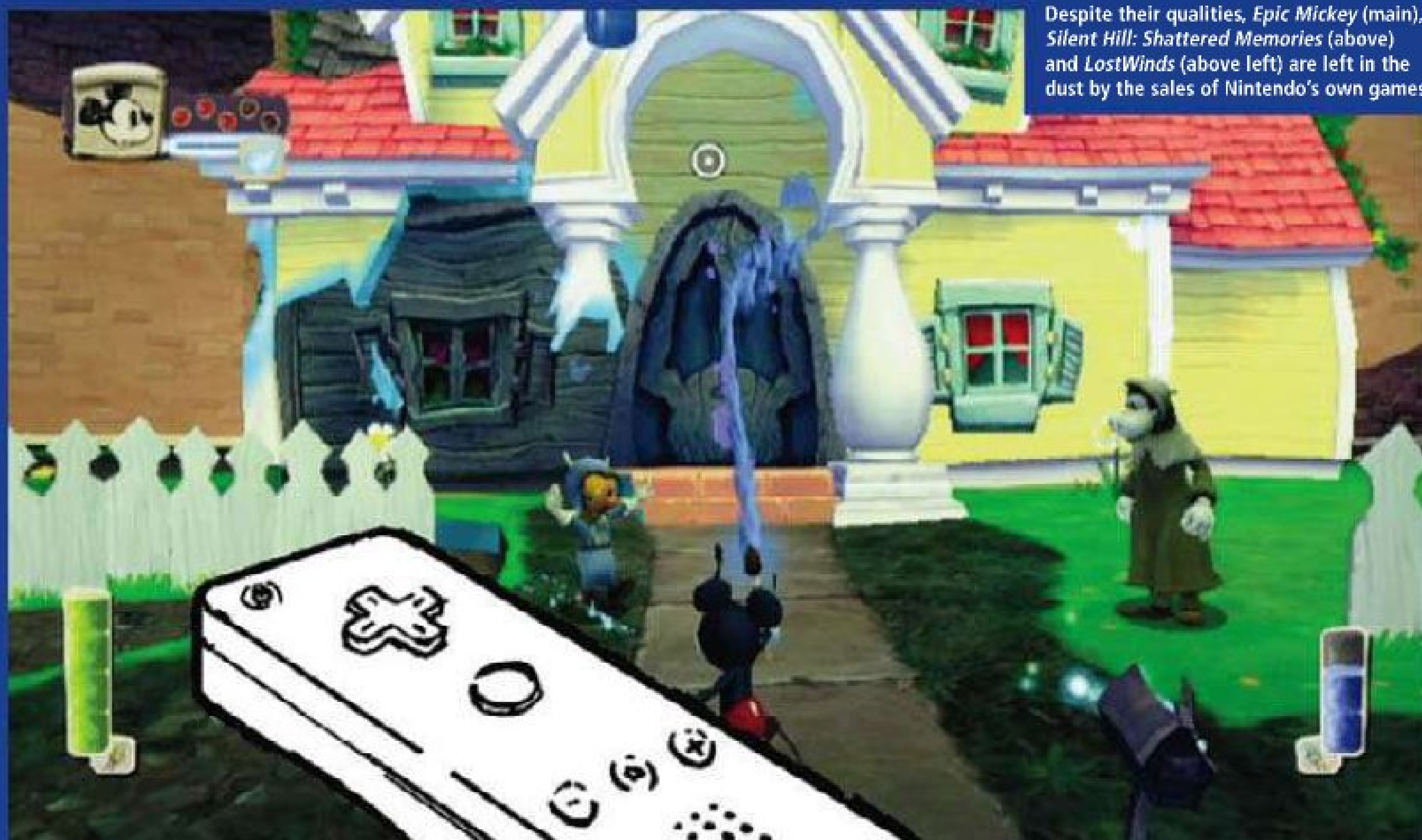
It's tempting to look exclusively to Nintendo as the wellspring of this rapid flow of changes, since its hardware has been so instrumental in familiarising audiences with the concept of gesture-based games. But motion control can be placed within a wide, rich context of innovations in the way we interact not just with games, but with all technology. For **David Braben**, founder and chairman of *Kinectimals* and *LostWinds* developer Frontier, this all began with the mouse. "Early experimental mice were heavy and expensive… they didn't take off until released with the first Apple Lisa, and even then it was a stuttering start until the Macintosh came out a little later," he says. "Within five years, it was the standard way to control just about all computers, but it simply supplemented the keyboard rather than replacing it.

ONLY NOW, FOUR YEARS AFTER NINTENDO'S WII INTRODUCED THE WIDER WORLD TO MOTION-BASED GAMING, ARE ITS EFFECTS ON DEVELOPERS AND GAMING'S AUDIENCE STARTING TO BECOME CLEAR

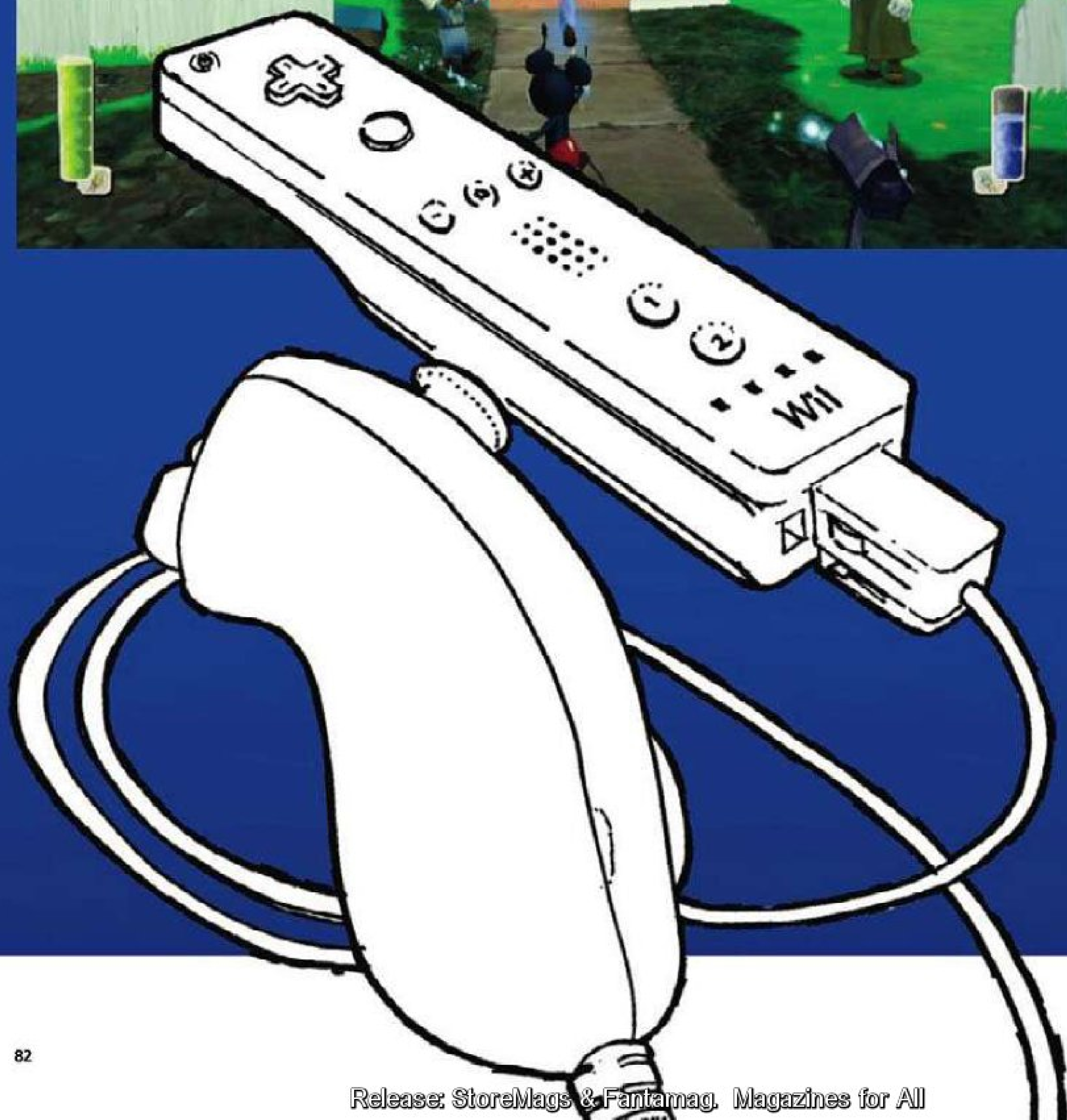
"There are plenty of things a mouse doesn't do well – try writing your name in an art package if you don't believe me – but otherwise software has become great at working within its limitations, and today we hardly notice its problems. The Wii, like all of these things, was a step along







Despite their qualities, *Epic Mickey* (main), *Silent Hill: Shattered Memories* (above) and *LostWinds* (above left) are left in the dust by the sales of Nintendo's own games



the continuum. I remember seeing the first mouse; the applications were unbelievably clunky, and the mice weren't as accurate as they are today. They've got better with time."

Emily Newton-Dunn of EA Bright Light, a studio geared towards family-friendly titles that has created games for Wii, Move and Kinect, sees motion control as just one facet of a wider shift across all consumer technology. "What we're actually talking about here is interaction design, and I think that the accessibility of technology is what is really changing now," she says. "It's about simplicity of use and intuitiveness, whether that be on an iPad, iPhone, touchscreen or a game controller. Suddenly, operating them is no longer a dark art. Many, many more people can get involved.

"I think Nintendo has always been looking at this kind of thing, with different degrees of success; they obviously have a handle on simplicity being key. Other platform holders have looked at it as well – Sony had the EyeToy, obviously. It's been a while coming, but now it's here, and games are infinitely more accessible to a wider range of people, which I think can only be a good thing."

The centrepiece of Nintendo's ideology in the run-up to the arrival of its Wii hardware was that most people found traditional controllers intimidating. To a generation brought up with videogame controllers, the hardware's gradually increasing complexity was subtle – a shoulder button here, a second analogue stick there – but motion gaming's success suggests that Nintendo had a point. As more complex technology drove videogames forward, millions of people were being left behind. All that was needed to bring them back to the party was an easier-to-understand method of control.

"If you look back to the controllers like the SNES, they were super, super-simple, pick up and play," says Newton-Dunn. "These days you look at a controller and it's a complicated piece of kit. A lot of the motion controllers have taken that element out of the equation. It's simplified it again – it allows you to focus more on what's going on on the screen rather than what's going on in your hands."

"I think it's not just simplification, it's also sophistication," argues Braben. "We're not simplifying things per se, we're trying to capture things that we do more naturally. But there's a lot more information in you moving to a position in space than whether you've got a button pressed down or not. It's accessibility that it brings, more so than

simplicity. People hate to be seen to be failures. For people who don't consider themselves gamers, the learning curve is too steep. As for enjoying it, that's so far away for them that they don't want to be part of it. What [motion control] is doing is breaking down that barrier."

Concerns over accessibility have been floating around for years, since well before the Wii launch, but mounting evidence has made it more difficult to deny their truth. The numbers speak for themselves: Nintendo has sold 76 million Wiis to date, which stacks up favourably against the 21.5 million units of GameCube hardware it managed to shift. What we don't yet know is what effect Move and Kinect will have on their respective consoles' userbases. Are the people currently investing in motion-sensing peripherals for their PS3s and 360s really new consumers, or are they merely a core audience looking for novelty?

Digging deeper into sales figures reveals a telling, and much-discussed, anomaly. Of the top ten best-selling Wii games, not one of them is from a thirdparty developer. Of the top 20, Ubisoft's *Just Dance* is the only non-Nintendo title to make the cut. Innovative Wii games like *Red Steel 2*, *Silent Hill: Shattered Memories* and, most recently, *Epic Mickey* have struggled to make an impact on the charts. If motion control has expanded the market for videogames, why is that new demographic so difficult for thirdparty games to reach?

The answer has a lot to do with the type of motion control game that tends to sell. Successful, accessible, massmarket-oriented motion-control games like *EA Sports Active*, *Wii Fit* and *Just Dance* sell millions to a casual audience. Hard sales data suggests that core gamers, meanwhile, are not only unconvinced by motion-based gaming but are actively turned off by the prospect. The market for games that attempt to incorporate motion technology into traditional genres, then, looks small when compared to the big, mainstream successes. What is responsible for this split?

Jason VandenBerghe was creative director on Ubisoft's *Red Steel 2*, one of the games Nintendo promoted heavily as a title that would demonstrate the capabilities of its Wii MotionPlus hardware. Though the game has sold steadily since its release in March 2010 – latest estimates put it at around 500,000 units worldwide – its initial sales were slow, and even now it's far away from *Wii Sports Resort*'s success at 21 million copies. VandenBerghe believes that there will, in the future, be a significant market for action-oriented, traditional games that use motion control, but that the audience right now is oddly fractured.

"I come down on the side of psychology," he says. "I think we've convinced ourselves that because [the Wii] has a white plastic case, it's not for us. We've convinced ourselves that there's no market because the gamers that are looking for that kind of experience have already decided that there's nothing for them on that platform. The Wii invited a whole new group of people to come and play; can you do that and retain the group of people who have long considered gaming their escape? Can you have those two groups play in the same field? I don't know if you can."

"THE WII INVITED A WHOLE NEW GROUP OF PEOPLE TO COME AND PLAY; CAN YOU DO THAT AND RETAIN THE GROUP OF PEOPLE WHO HAVE LONG CONSIDERED GAMING THEIR ESCAPE? I DON'T KNOW IF YOU CAN"

It's difficult to draw too many universal conclusions from looking at Nintendo's hardware alone. Firstparty games have always sold far better on Nintendo platforms, and brand recognition is likely to be as responsible as anything else for thirdparty games' struggle to sell on the system. It may play out differently with Kinect and Move – though critical reception so far has favoured the first- and secondparty titles for those devices, too. The unfortunate truth is that in the vast majority of cases, thirdparty motion-control games simply aren't as good as, say, Nintendo's. Across the board, they appear to struggle to harness the technology as effectively, leading to the kind of botched, frustrating games that have shaped the reputation of motion control among gaming's core audience.

"Quality sells. Nintendo has done a great job of maintaining quality in their firstparty offerings, but sadly there have been a lot of poor quality thirdparty shovelware titles," Braben observes. "I suspect in the broad market to which the Wii appeals, there is less brand recognition of individual publishers or developers other than Nintendo, and that tends to make buyers more cautious of



CASE STUDY: RED STEEL 2

Platform: **Wii** UK release: **March 2010**
Developer: **Ubisoft Paris** Approximate sales: **500,000**

Red Steel 2 **was one of the first titles for MotionPlus, and one of few Wii games aimed at a core action-game audience. As a first attempt at full motion-tracking sword combat, it got a lot right. Like many Wii games, it has sold steadily rather than making a huge splash in its first weeks before disappearing, but it hasn't seen the success that its publisher – or lead designer Jason VandenBerghe – had hoped for, which is perhaps why so few other developers have followed its lead.**

Red Steel 2 **was in a unique position as a flagship MotionPlus game: VandenBerghe and his team had access to any help they asked for from Nintendo. "But it was a leap to go: 'Let's ask the Nintendo research group if they have any algorithms that will solve this problem'," VandenBerghe explains. "The truth is that the realities of production push you to solve the problem yourself right now. If we had not had the unique characteristics of that project – it was Ubisoft, a big publisher; it was a sequel; it was a prestige title; it was something everyone, including Nintendo, wanted to succeed – it would have been easy to say: 'This is too hard and too expensive – let's back out'.**

"We knew it would be a risky bet. But at the time it looked like it could have gone either way – I still think it could have gone either way. On the bright side, the game was good!"





CASE STUDY: JUST DANCE

Platform: **Wii** UK release: **November 2009**
Developer: **Ubisoft Paris** Approximate sales: **4.3 million**

Developed by the same studio as *Red Steel 2*, *Just Dance* went completely the other way – in creative direction as well as sales. Far and away the best-selling thirdparty game on Wii, *Just Dance* is one of only a few concrete examples of games that wouldn't have been possible before motion control. It's also proof of just how much the videogame market has changed since Nintendo's console launched. When *Just Dance* knocked *Call Of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* off the top of the UK sales chart in 2009, it proved beyond all doubt that the audience for games is bigger and more diverse now than it ever has been – broad enough to accommodate two things as different as a military FPS and a dancing game at the top of the table.

***Just Dance* is too often dismissed as a facile gimmick, but there's a lot to learn from it. Its interface is perfect: do as the dancers do. It never makes you feel like a failure, even though it tracks arm motions with much more accuracy than it's given credit for. And it never lets the technology get in the way of the fun. There aren't many motion games as effortless. As a good idea well executed, *Just Dance* was a fine blueprint for a new type of dance game.**



thirdparty titles in general. Poor quality is a danger to any industry. I hope Microsoft and Sony will be very aware of this."

This reveals a side of the motion-control revolution that is often drowned out by gleeful discussion of widening markets and skyrocketing profits: it has invented very new and very real problems for developers working with the technology. "It's a big fad right now. It's very exciting as the new thing and so I think that no one wants to get out and say too much about how hard it is," says VandenBerghe. "Having gone through a full development cycle, I feel a lot more comfortable saying there are some real problems. We smashed into them head-on and they were startlingly difficult to solve."

These problems aren't only down to the technology itself. *Red Steel 2* went through eight entirely different control systems before the team finally hit upon one that worked. There are practical issues that make it much harder to build a quality, reliable control system for motion devices than for normal controllers. Inventing new, intuitive ways of interacting with what's onscreen using unfamiliar technology is an enormously difficult task, and, as VandenBerghe explains, there simply aren't enough successful, well-made games out there to serve as basic templates.

"One of the things that thirdparty developers really struggle with is that they don't have the internal research groups to talk to," he says. "They don't have access to the information that the hardware manufacturers are getting through their R&D teams. Thirdparty teams usually do not have the time, the inclination or the ability to get ahold of that information, and they probably wouldn't know what to do with it if they did. It's not that they aren't skilled, it's just that they don't have the right data.

"I don't want to imply that game developers only learn by copying other people. That's not really true, but we do learn by looking at the best examples. The best practices get analysed and broken down. My hope for *Red Steel 2* was that it might be the beginning of that language around motion control and combat, because we cracked a lot of the problems. But I don't think it reached enough people to have that kind of impact. We need to reach a tipping point where there are enough good games out there for other developers to look at and analyse, so that knowledge can be spread out, before thirdparty games can succeed."

The difficulties involved in creating effective motion-based games stem from the simple fact that this area of development is embryonic. Even Wii MotionPlus, which launched ten months ago, has yet to be explored by many studios outside of Nintendo's own. Unlike the world of traditional interfaces, in which, say, pressing Start counterintuitively leads to pausing the action across practically all games on all platforms, there is also no established universal language for motion control. Microsoft's entirely controller-less Kinect presents a particularly open-ended set of challenges.

"None of us have had [Kinect] for very long. In terms of just coming to terms with what works well and what doesn't, we're still starting out," says Braben, looking across the current Kinect line-up. "I think the user interface in *Dance Central* works very well, for instance. There are things in *Kinectimals* that just feel natural. And I think there are elements in some other titles that don't feel that natural. We're essentially making the rules up as we go along with this. I think it will settle down – it's already started to, a little bit – into what works and what doesn't.

"In many respects, it's been back to the drawing board. We don't yet have a vocabulary. You have to start with what people do naturally, otherwise you defeat the whole point of such a simple system. People tend to point or reach out, and that is something the system has to embrace."

The greatest obstacle to a smooth, perfectly intuitive motion-control system is actually the player. If you've ever observed someone play *Wii Sports* or *Kinect Adventures* for the first time, you'll know that people have wildly different interpretations of what 'jump' and 'swing' actually mean, from nervous hops and hesitant flicks of the wrist to sweeping, table-lamp-destroying arcs and sofa-spanning leaps. Creating an interface system that can understand and interpret such a vast variety of inputs is nearly impossible – and teaching players exactly what they need to do, says VandenBerghe, is just as hard.

"NONE OF US HAVE HAD KINECT FOR VERY LONG. WE'RE ESSENTIALLY MAKING THE RULES UP AS WE GO ALONG. I THINK IT WILL SETTLE DOWN – IT'S ALREADY STARTED TO – INTO WHAT WORKS AND WHAT DOESN'T"

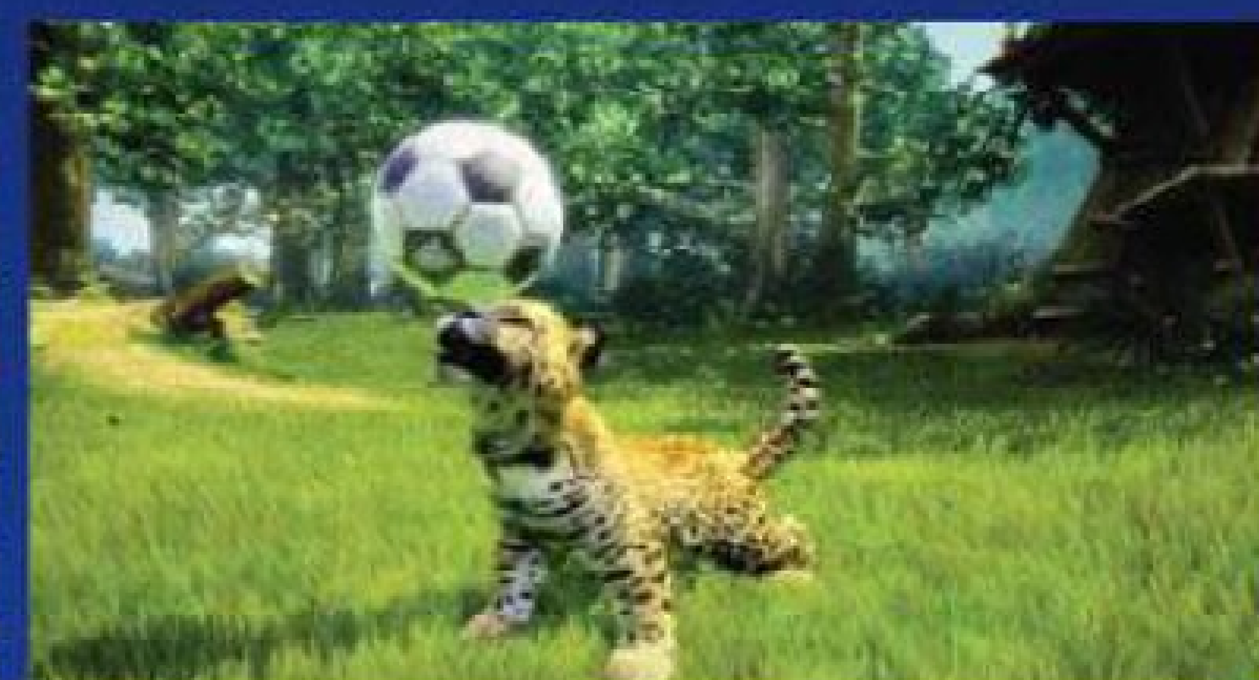
"The most important unobserved feature on the thumbstick is the rim, the guide," he observes. "You can't put an input into that thumbstick that it doesn't understand. Say push forward on the stick and everyone will do the same thing. But when I say 'swing', it's astounding. You literally get a unique response with every person. It's based on their prior experience, what sports they play, whether they play sports at all, their fantasy understanding of the technology and how it's supposed to work – you see people trying to compensate for how they think it works."

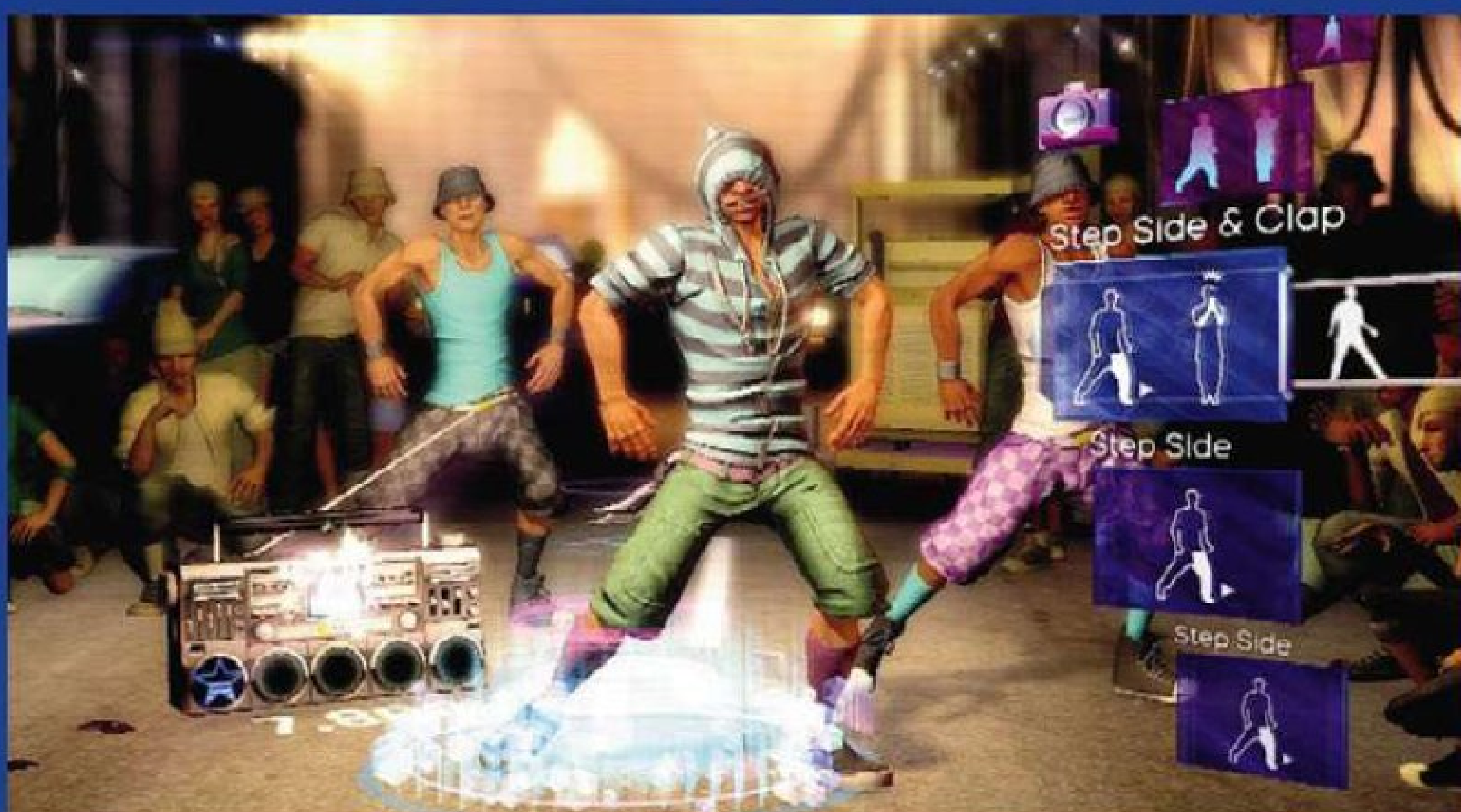
Braben gives an example of this discrepancy from *Kinectimals*' development: when test groups were asked to throw a ball, American children tended to throw overarm, while European kids threw underarm. Effectively training players in the right gesture vocabulary is something that only a few sophisticated motion-control games have achieved. For simple pointing and twisting, it's easier to rely on a player's intuition, but for really intense activity like 3D swordfighting, the solution is harder to find. *Red Steel 2* eventually solved the problem by showing players video clips of a model onscreen. *Kinectimals* goes down the same route with Bumble, a flying ferret/opossum hybrid which demonstrates the correct arm and leg gestures.

The only real solution, believes VandenBerghe, is comprehensive tutorials – but physical training of the sort that sportspeople and martial artists undertake is hugely impractical in a videogame. "Not only is it not practical, but it's actually considered bad practice," VandenBerghe says. "Tutorials as a rule are considered to be the last-ditch effort. Really what you want is to make sure that your training is integrated naturally into the gameplay – allowing the player to learn without really feeling like they're learning it.

"What's frustrating about motion control is that if you want to achieve a real degree of skill in the game, it's literally not possible as far as I can tell. I couldn't figure it out,



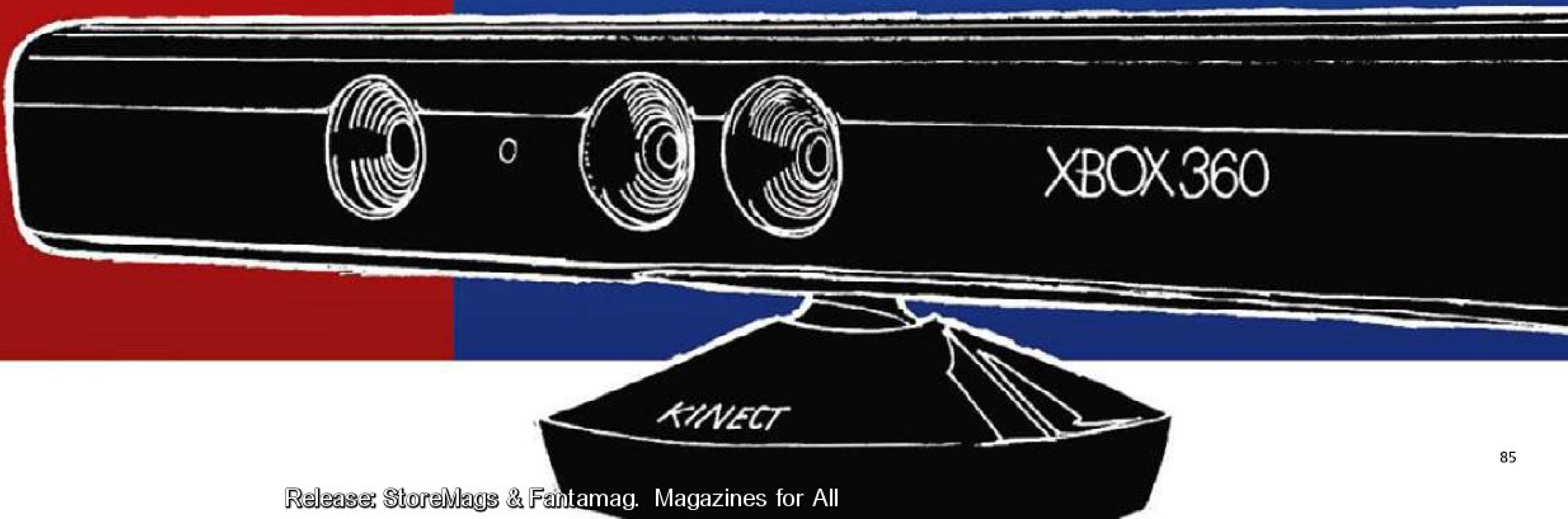




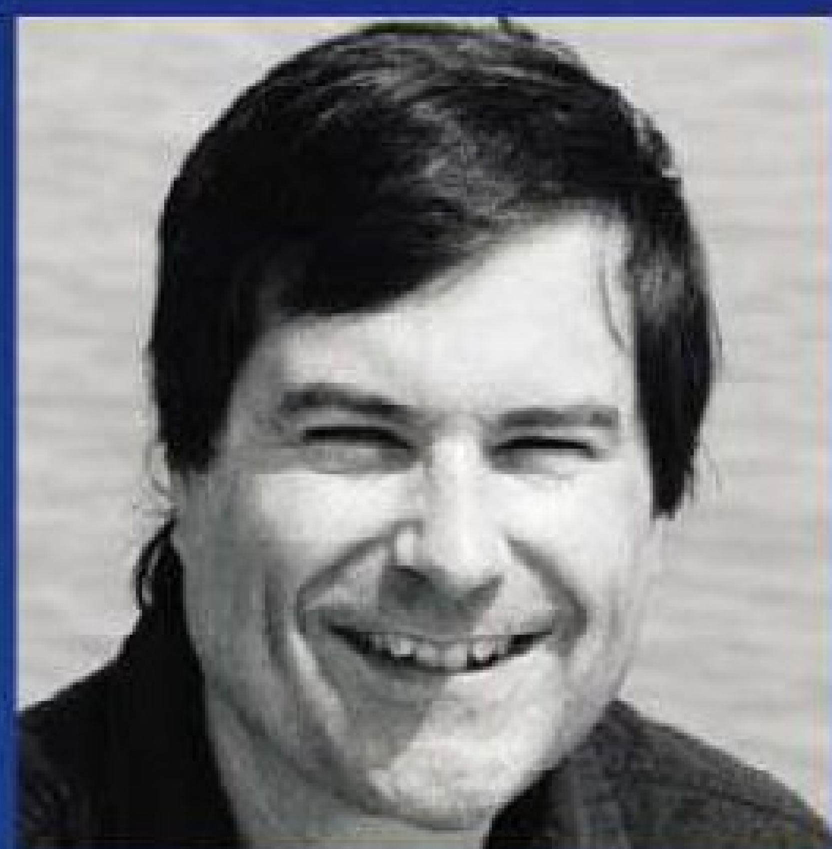




EA Sports Active (top left), Braben's *Kinectimals* (top right), Harmonix's *Dance Central* (centre), *Kinect Sports* (above right) and the bundled title *Kinect Adventures* (above left) are titles that couldn't exist without the motion controller. Other titles, such as *Deathly Hallows Part 1*, treat it as an optional extra




Jason VandenBerghe, Ubisoft


David Braben, Frontier Developments


Emily Newton-Dunn, EA Bright Light


EA Bright Light's *Create* is a rare title supporting both Wii and Move

not in the time that I had. I think that's why, so far, motion-control inputs and interfaces tend to be really, really simple, because if you don't have the time and interest in your development cycle to develop a full training system inside your game, then players won't ever get further than just really basic motions that you can consistently do."

Simplicity, then, is really the only practical option for most developers – even when presented with technology like Move, Wii MotionPlus and Kinect, which are designed to support many shades of subtlety. But this simplification is also what's holding motion-controlled games back creatively. In order to break out of this casual ghettoisation, they need to bridge the gap between ease of control and sophistication of content. Right now, few developers are making games with the depth, ambition and quality expected of a controller-based triple-A title.

"Honestly, I think that the most important reason these games don't exist is that there aren't any good examples of successes," says VandenBerghe, "and so developers are afraid that there's no way to succeed there. If you look at a field and there are no successes, it means one of two things: either nobody's done it right, or it can't be done. And the money guys do the math, come away unsure and only give you a little bit of money, and that's not enough to do it right. So it's a self-fulfilling prophecy."

Publishers can't be blamed for failing to invest years and millions into high-quality motion-control games when their audiences are so small. MotionPlus, Kinect and Move are all optional peripherals, and that is hugely limiting in itself. "The problem is it's still an add-on," says VandeBerghe. "Historically, when you look at add-ons throughout the gaming industry, they lead to significant failure. As long as the players have the option to not buy the motion-control device with their console, the market will never be large enough to support triple-A development. If only five to ten per cent of the customers who bought the console have the device that would allow them to play the game, right there you have this massive cut in your potential audience."

But VandenBerghe sees a solution. Move and Kinect could, potentially, make bigger-budget motion-control games viable if they can be developed with a crossplatform approach. "There are two things that have to happen," he asserts. "Firstly, [motion] games have to go multiplatform. The second thing is that in the next hardware

SONY

SONY

DATASTREAM

BEST-SELLING FIRSTPARTY WII GAMES (BUNDLED):
Wii Sports: 67.71 million
Wii Play: 23.78 million

BEST-SELLING FIRSTPARTY WII GAMES (STANDALONE):
Mario Kart Wii: 24.01 million
New Super Mario Bros: 16.73 million

BEST-SELLING THIRDPARTY WII GAMES:
Just Dance: 4.3 million
Carnival Games: 3.7 million

Kinect units sold to consumers up to December 2010: 2.5 million
Move units shipped to retail up to December 2010: 4.1 million

generation, it's necessary that motion control is included standard in the box. Because then game developers will have a large enough potential market that they can afford to put ten million dollars into building a triple-A experience. Until those two factors are possible, we're not going to break out of the casual niche."

The major obstacle to crossplatform development for such games is the obvious discrepancy between the hardware's capabilities, but Newton-Dunn points out that there's no reason why a multiplatform game shouldn't be created that would adjust for each input device. "We did *Create* on Wii and on Move control, so I don't see why multiplatform motion games shouldn't happen," she says. "I think it's up to the developer; each of those games would be distinct, but I don't see why you wouldn't be able to develop across all three. It comes down to the type of game."

Platform holders aren't going out of their way to make things easy for multiplatform motion-controlled projects. Each is still keen to secure as much exclusive content as possible in order to prove the benefits of its motion control technology. But, as Braben points out, this is nothing new – and besides, some games simply work better when they're designed for a single platform. "Exclusive deals have happened for a long time, and will continue to happen," he says. "We saw it with Betamax versus VHS, and every game platform throughout history. We have already had multiplatform motion-control games – our rollercoaster game *Thrillville* was out on six platforms, including Wii – and I'm sure they will continue to happen, but for a carefully tuned experience like *LostWinds* or *Kinectimals* it makes sense to go as a single-platform game."

Even four years on from its mainstream introduction, the opportunities for motion-controlled gaming aren't clear. MotionPlus has dissolved the obvious limitations of the original Wii technology, while Move and Kinect open up entirely new possibilities. If, as VandenBerghe hopes, the remaining restrictions around motion control are lifted over the next few years, a lot more can change. We could be headed towards an environment in which motion control is ubiquitous, in traditional triple-A development as well as the lucrative but creatively limiting casual sector.

"What excites me at the moment is the prospect of augmented games on Kinect, as we haven't seen any yet," says Braben. "This is where I think the most obvious core gamer experiences will come from – even if it's simply adding the ability to lean left or right to look out from behind a wall in an FPS while still using the controller. But I think there are many more great things it can enable for the future."

This is all assuming that motion control doesn't simply drop out of fashion. Not that such a turnaround seems likely. If nothing else, the scale of investment into motion-based technology by Sony and Microsoft means that it would be difficult to disentangle the companies from it for the foreseeable future.

"THERE ARE FANTASTIC GAMES THAT DO NOT AND NEVER WILL HAVE ANY SORT OF MOTION CONTROL IN THERE, BUT THERE ARE OTHER GAMES THAT BENEFIT, AND BRING IN MORE PEOPLE TO PLAY THEM"

"I'm very hopeful," says VandenBerghe. "Given how much effort they put into it, and how important it is for them to be providing players with 'new' experiences, I don't see how the hardware manufacturers can at this point back away from it. I think that motion control will be standard. The future is bright, but it won't be for three or four years.

"I think there are about ten to 20 per cent of gamers out there for whom motion control is the key to the game that they've always wanted to play. That's why I think that there's a market for this in the future. There's an action game out there for those people, and I would love that to be *Red Steel 3*. Is it going to sell *Call Of Duty* numbers and take over the world? I don't think so. But absolutely there is money to be made and fun to be had inside that genre."

Newton-Dunn is also positive about the future of motion control, but she doesn't necessarily believe that it has irrevocably changed the way we play games, or that it will in the future – it's just made it easier for more people to join in: "It's just an evolution of the controller. I don't know if everyone is going to suddenly go down the [controller-less] Kinect route, but there has been a large amount of success with motion controls.

"People have seen that by making things more accessible and simpler to play, there are a lot of people who want to engage; *SingStar* did it with the microphone. There are fantastic games that do not and never will have any sort of motion control in there, but there are other games that benefit, and bring in more people to play them. I think people want simple ways of interacting with their games; I don't think that's going to go away."

"It's a very important technology for the industry. They're broadening what we can do and broadening the audience that we can appeal to," Braben agrees. "We absolutely should embrace it. It's fantastic, what it offers. I think there's an iceberg of possibility there and we've only seen the tiny little tip of it."

In the context of a wider shift towards accessibility in technology – one in which Apple, as well as Nintendo, has played a major part – motion control is a natural step in the evolution of interface design. It has certainly changed gaming's audience. But in the world of big-budget triple-A development, motion control's impact outside of Nintendo's own games has been negligible. Developers are still struggling to make competent motion-control games with both depth and accessibility; most simply don't try, and the infrastructure isn't there to support those that do.

Now that motion control is part of every console, though, it may not be long before it's part of every game. As more consumers invest in MotionPlus, Kinect and Move, creating ambitious and innovative games that hold more appeal for long-term gamers is more viable. The technology's growing pains have resulted in a fractured audience, but the market is still expanding, and it could take only one big thirdparty success to turn the tide. Motion control has already changed the world, but what happens next will be the real test.









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Review

New games assessed in words and numbers

Edge's most played

Blur



Bizarre Creations' future may be uncertain, but the excitable power of this racer is indisputable. We'd love a sequel, but would settle for DLC to expand the arsenal.
360, PC, PS3, ACTIVISION

World Of Warcraft



Our goblin's been through some scrapes – he's been shipwrecked, rocket-launched a fiery tortoise and served vol-au-vents at a party. We love him deeply already.
MAC, PC, BLIZZARD

Henry Hatsworth In The Puzzling Adventure



One of EA's brightest personalities, Hatsworth's gentlemanly journey through puzzles and parallel worlds remains one of the most innovative DS games available.
DS, EA GAMES

Menus à la carte

What are the options for options?



Dead Space's innovative menus live on in the sequel, along with Clarke's health-bar spine, an inspired piece of modern interface design

The old-fashioned HUD has fallen out of fashion of late. Your average FPS relegates it to a discreet ammo counter in the bottom right of the screen, and casts a modest veil over the rest of the usual furniture – grudgingly conceding you've been injured via a splash of blood and a red haze, but keeping anything so typically videogamey as a health bar well out of sight.

Menu screens, however, are harder to hide. The *Dead Space* franchise – which has wholly absorbed the traditional HUD into its fiction – depicts Isaac Clarke's inventory as a holographic display, which he must sift through in realtime. It's a clever touch: by locating Clarke's inventory within his world, Visceral heightens the tension and horror by taking away what is traditionally a time-suspending refuge for players with their backs against the wall.

Compare this to the player's 'sanctuary' in *Fable III*, a place that hides its function as menu screen to a far greater extent, but does so at the cost of the game's pacing. It's not very often you'll want to switch to a different weapon of the same type mid-combat, but doing so will require you to transport your character to the sanctuary, walk them to the armoury within, and confirm the weapon of your choice through a piece of illusion-damaging UI. It might be explained in the fiction, but it's just as ruinous to a battle's exhilarating pacing as a traditional pause menu, if not more so.

LittleBigPlanet 2 isn't afraid of a menu screen, but you suspect it doesn't have much of a choice, such is the sheer volume of user content its level-select screens have to wade through, and the variety of options the Popit menu has to squeeze in. We're not convinced the decision to let users design the planet-cum-menu through which other players will access their content has been an unqualified success – it's surprising just how unintuitive an inspired artist can be – but it's impossible to deny that Media Molecule has extended the DIY artistry of the game to its more functional layers.

And that, perhaps, should be developers' ambition when tackling the Menu Screen Problem – not to bury its (often quite important) functionality beneath fictional layers, but instead to make it work in a way that remains true to the spirit of the game.









Edge's scoring system explained:
1 = one, 2 = two, 3 = three,
4 = four, 5 = five, 6 = six, 7 = seven,
8 = eight, 9 = nine, 10 = ten





LITTLEBIGPLANET 2

FORMAT: PS3 RELEASE: OUT NOW (US), JANUARY 21 (UK)
PUBLISHER: SCE DEVELOPER: MEDIA MOLECULE
PREVIOUSLY IN: E215, E222

Just like its predecessor, *LBP2* leans heavily on its title sequence to make its big statement. But although the original had the weight of enthusing a generation to the idea of material creativity on console, the message this time around is more complex, and perhaps even more urgent. Media Molecule needs to convince players that, despite the familiarity of Sackboy, the return of narrator Stephen Fry and some kooky '70s tunes, *LBP2* is much more than DLC packaged on a Blu-ray disc and sold at full price.

And that message is that *LBP2* is more dynamic. The intro is again accompanied by Left Bank Two, but not the original version. Instead we hear a rinky-dink rendition made with the in-game sequencer, lending it a dash of homemade electronic vitality and a first hint of *LBP2*'s new toolset. Then it's into a rolling set of interactive playthings which celebrate the team that made the game, from jumping on a bounce pad, setting off little animations over a revolving wheel of staffers, to a neon-lit scrolling shooter in which your shots blast the portraits away to reveal their names. The aesthetic, meanwhile, has switched from *LBP*'s material world of machines to an electronic one of filigreed circuit boards.

This, then, is a digital revolution. And the analogy is apt. If the industrial revolution introduced a new world of physical hardship, the electronic one brought ease and power to all; if *LBP* offered some powerful but simple tools that required tenacious dedication to fully understand, *LBP2*'s biggest accomplishment is that it democratises what made *LBP* a landmark in console gaming, making what was once arcane accessible through considered refinements and astute additions.

> LBP2's biggest accomplishment is that it democratises what made LBP a landmark, making what was once arcane accessible

As with *LBP*, the place to observe what an impact they make is in story mode. Though *LBP*'s story levels were bursting with ideas, they weren't so hot on pacing and variety. *LBP2*'s are the product of far greater maturity and experience. The main track may only provide four or so hours of play, but it's far more coherent, using the new cinematic tools to tell a simplistic but delightfully surreal tale about an attack on Craftworld by the evil Negativitron. The cutscenes, all made using the tools to which you have access, are short, dramatic and funny, pulling you through with almost as much impetus as your curiosity to see what mechanics and tricks Media Molecule will try next.

The story levels are more tightly designed than *LBP*'s, too, never lasting beyond their welcome and all hinged on exploring one idea. They'll have you shooting water to put out fires in a lush jungle garden and clearing the way for your faithful sackbots to shoot enemies with their positive rays; you'll be escaping an exploding base in a scrolling

Special praise must be directed towards *LBP2*'s music, a large and eclectic list of purpose-written and licensed tracks which propel you through the story mode





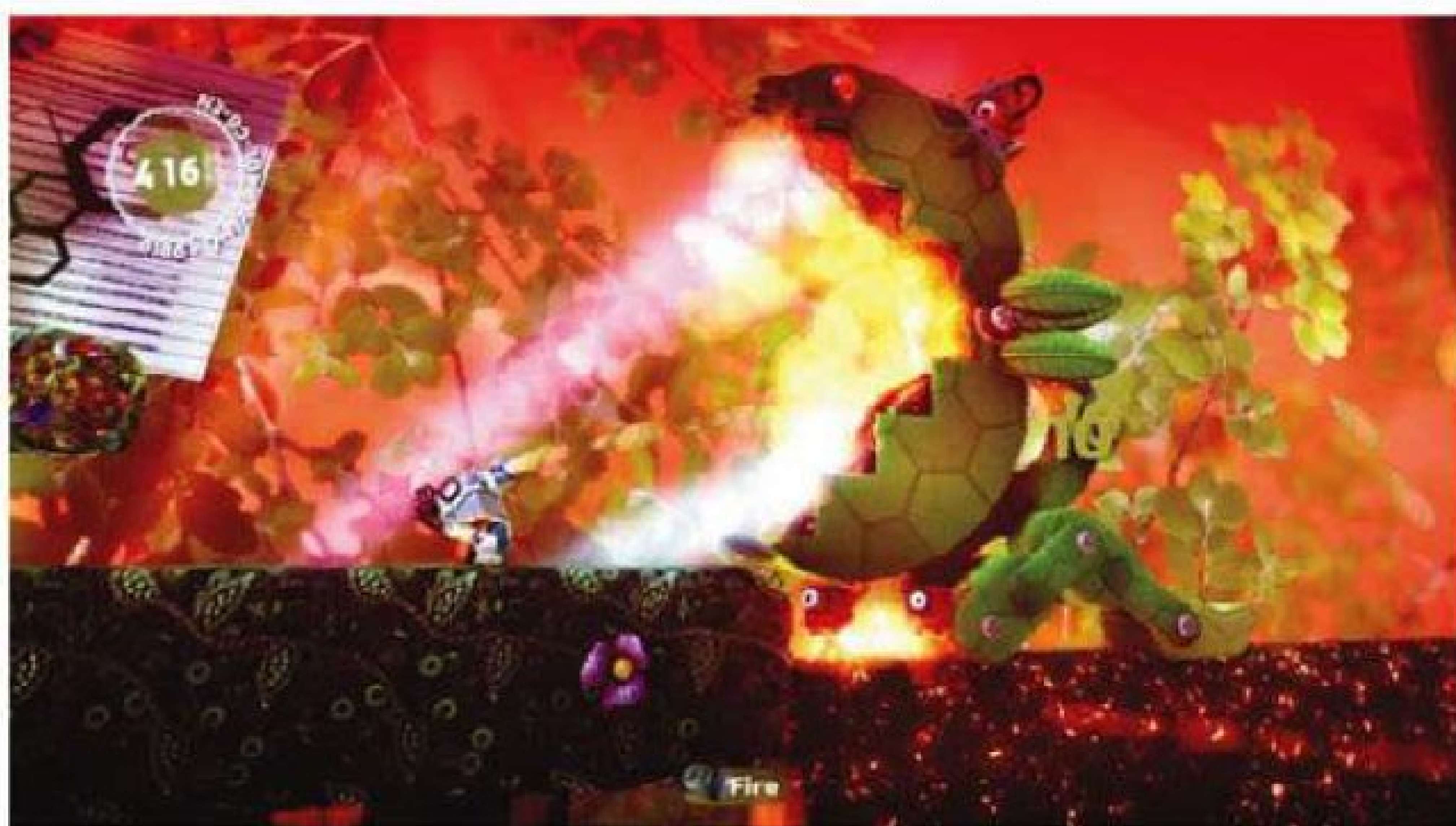
The intro sequence (left) hints at the range of delights to come, emphasising the game tools' ability to allow for greater and deeper interaction with the environment







The fundamentally unchanged Popit menu (above) deals with the weight of new tools, materials and objects remarkably well, but still requires experience in order to use efficiently





The temperature gauge (above) restricts levels' complexity, but intricate ideas can now be spread over several levels connected by Level Links. Entire series of levels can also be stitched together

shooter and riding a laser-toting llama. Along with an infectious love for creative geekery – one character is called Higginbotham, a nod to the creator of *Tennis For Two* and characterised as a Withnail And I refugee – the story mode's wit and imagination is fantastic. The contrast between a series of high-octane vehicle levels to a gentle platforming section in which you must both avoid and use flaming fireflies to light your way proves just how far *LBP2* has come from the genre that birthed it.

Of course, entertainment aside, the story levels' real purpose is to deliberately reveal the capabilities of the new toolset, which is entirely a reflection of and a reaction to what *LBP*'s players made. Knowing the difficulties of making logic gates, timers, counters and randomisers, which would require vast, memory-clogging machines in *LBP*, Media Molecule has reduced down many functions to simple chips. A sequencer makes easy the task of controlling repeating progressions of behaviours, from patterns of lights to mechanical processes. Few of these nuts and bolts were impossible in *LBP*, but they remained outside the scope of casual creators. Other tweaks include the ability to edit objects that are behind others (in *LBP* you'd have to move foreground objects out of the way), while a glue tool allows you to select a series of objects to join together, helping you better manage what's attached and what's not.

LBP2's big new ideas, though, go far beyond what was possible in its predecessor. Sackbots come equipped with flexible AI which, with a little jiggery-pokery on their circuit boards, can be trained to do whatever you want, from helping out to hunting you down. They can even be made to speak and act along to your recorded actions, features that work well with the cinematic tools – which allow for transitions and camera pans – and the simple music sequencer. The Creatinator is Sackboy's head-mounted gun which can shoot anything you want, from fire, plasma and water to created objects. Sackboy is also newly empowered with the Grabinator and Grappling Hook, allowing him to throw objects and swing. And the Controllinator takes players outside of Sackboy's distinctive control (which has been made very slightly more responsive), providing comprehensive options to create avatars and vehicles which move in just the way you want them to.



The Cakinator, which is simply a Creatinator set to fire stickily iced cupcakes, provides the focus of a couple of levels for its ability to kill enemies and provide platforms

These additions take *LBP2* far beyond mere premium DLC. So, yes, it's more dynamic than the original package in every way that makes sense – at least within that same world that Media Molecule constructed in 2008. And therein lies *LBP2*'s inherent restriction. It provides a revolution, but only inside its own idiosyncratic attitude and aesthetic. Sackboy remains Sackboy, and he won't convert those who didn't like the way he behaved in *LBP*. And for all the fascinating flexibility of its toolset, clearly this is still a framework: you can stamp a creation with your own style, but the overall vibe will ultimately be Media Molecule's. For those who are happy to embrace it, though, *LBP2* represents a dazzling new opportunity for creating deep, diverse and ingenious play. **[9]**

Creative labs

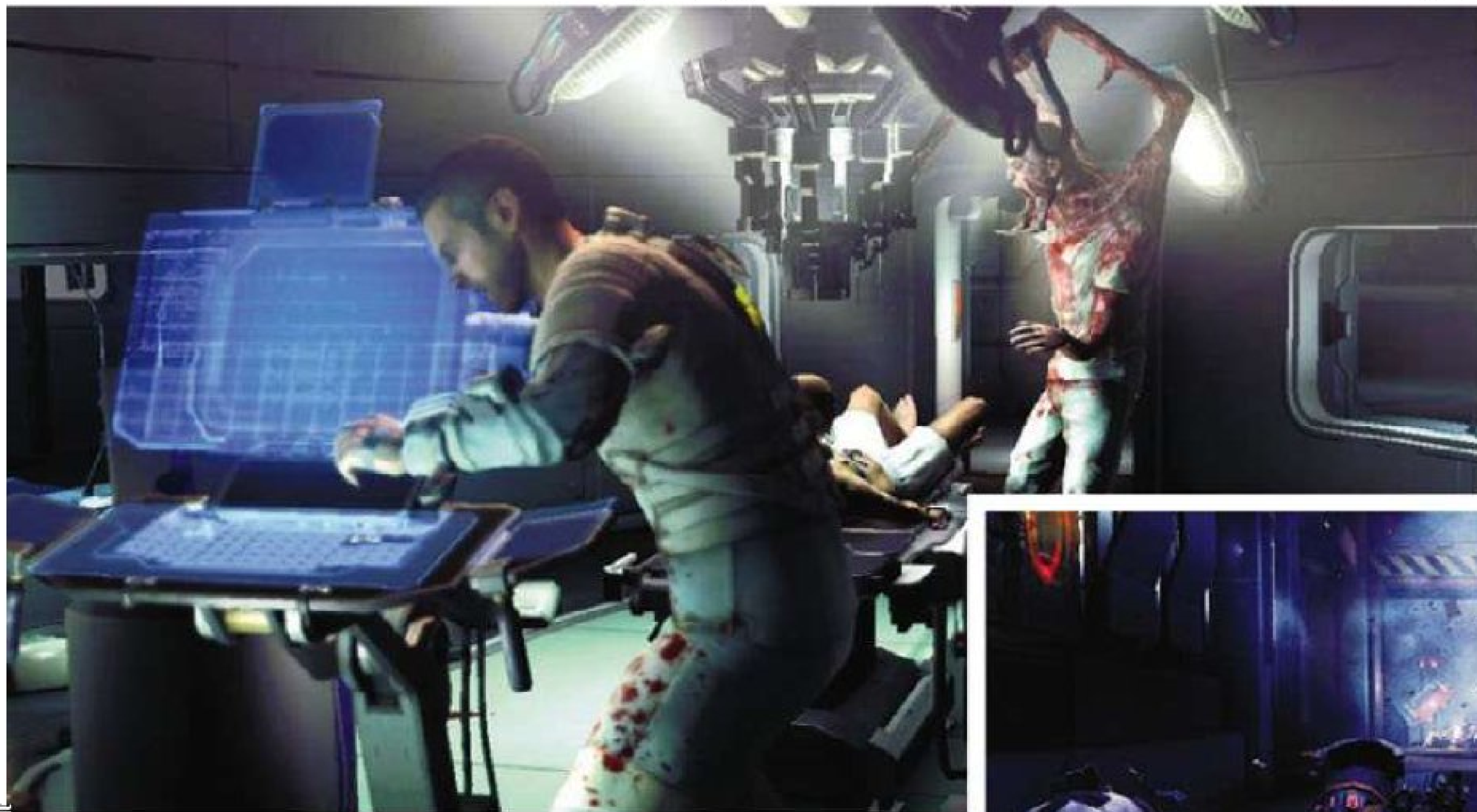


The *LBP2* beta has produced some exceptional creator games, such as Ice Age: Extinction, an atmospheric Grabinator-powered adventure (above), and The Lost, a *Heavy Rain*-esque thriller, but we're far from seeing the limits of UGC yet. Fears that the Trophy award levels that plagued *LBP*'s Cool Levels section will return will be allayed by the fact that *LBP2*'s Trophies and Pins, a vast collection of in-game rewards, are more considered and are clearly designed to encourage social and creative play, along with the addition of better filtering and browsing resources, such as lbp.me and Media Molecule's own picks.





Among the game's more unsettling enemies are the pack (above left) – shrieking, child-sized swarms of speedy necromorphs which first appear outside The Swarm's elementary school. This sequel doesn't only vary the enemies you face, but how you'll face them. Controlling a hanging, upside-down Clarke to fend off a group of attackers is a satisfying challenge (above right)







The Sprawl brings with it the new danger of blowing a vacuum-sealed window and being sucked into space. On the one hand it can be handy for clearing rooms of necromorphs; on the other it's an easy way to die



DEAD SPACE 2

FORMAT: 360, PS3 (VERSION TESTED) RELEASE: JANUARY 28
PUBLISHER: EA DEVELOPER: VISCERAL GAMES
PREVIOUSLY IN: E211, E216, E222, E223

Somewhere near the halfway point of *Dead Space 2*, engineer-hero Isaac Clarke tiptoes through a ruined elementary school in the game's new, scattered installation setting of The Sprawl. He comes across a window beyond which a woman is kneeling, her arms held wide as a baby drags itself awkwardly towards her. She's oblivious to the fact that the baby's body is an angry yellow drum of poison, and that its head sits obscenely backwards on its shoulders so that, when it climbs into her arms, it stares directly at Clarke, before exploding and bringing down on the scene a curtain of thick, textured red.

More than anything, this is blackly funny. A drawn-out, dare-you-to-watch, macabre kind of funny, but definitely humorous. *Dead Space 2* has everything its predecessor had – a principal mix of sophistication and dread, underpinned by elegant survival horror mechanics and visual design that's nothing short of brilliant. But what it offers as a sequel isn't more of the same but louder, or more of the same with bigger bosses, but more of the same with a greater depth of personality.

Three years after the events aboard the USG Ishimura, Clarke awakes in a psychiatric ward in The Sprawl, a space station in orbit around Saturn's moon, Titan. The setup is brief, and delivered in an opening level full of deep-end shocks and penetrating limbs: The Sprawl, learns a straitjacketed and vulnerable Clarke, has been overrun by the same reanimated horde of pointy Freudianisms he encountered before. It falls to him to pick at the scab of a government and Unitologist conspiracy that surrounds both this new infestation and the creation of a new Marker, the monolithic religious artefact at the centre of the original outbreak.

Past this breathless opener, it's a relief to find the game not rationing weapons or abilities, as Clarke quickly regains both the core of his industrial arsenal (the forcefully functional plasma cutter and line gun) and his telekinesis and stasis powers. These abilities are particularly crucial, enabling *Dead Space 2* to take the most advanced tactics and techniques from the original as a starting point. Only players who ventured into *Dead Space*'s hard and impossible difficulty levels came to realise how essential the necromorph-slowing stasis ability could be, or how launching objects and enemy carcasses at attackers could hold the key to ammo-less survival. *Dead Space 2* is all the richer for pushing these skills from the start.

New guns and enemies are the minimum price of entry for a sequel, and *Dead Space 2*'s add variety without disrupting the game's careful balance or practical aesthetics. The detonator is a heavy grenade launcher, also capable of laying perimeter-building remote mines to floors and walls, while the javelin gun brings the wall-pinning stopping power that Clarke's laser weapons tend to lack. New necromorphs, meanwhile, are sprinkled in with the old. Some mark themselves out with timidity and speed – velociraptor-like





The Sprawl's windows offer grand views (above) of gas clouds, satellites and, from the right angle, Saturn itself. It makes for an imposing backdrop, and it's a far cry from the iron walls and relentless claustrophobia of the original game



As well as increasingly tough regular necromorphs, in a nice touch several areas feature weaker, newly converted enemies still wearing the shreds of their old clothing



Where previously he could only jump from point to point, Clarke is now fully manoeuvrable in zero-gravity environments thanks to a typically tidy new control system, which forms the basis of several disorienting puzzles



It's a relief to find the game not rationing weapons or abilities, as Clarke quickly regains the core of his arsenal and his telekinesis and stasis powers

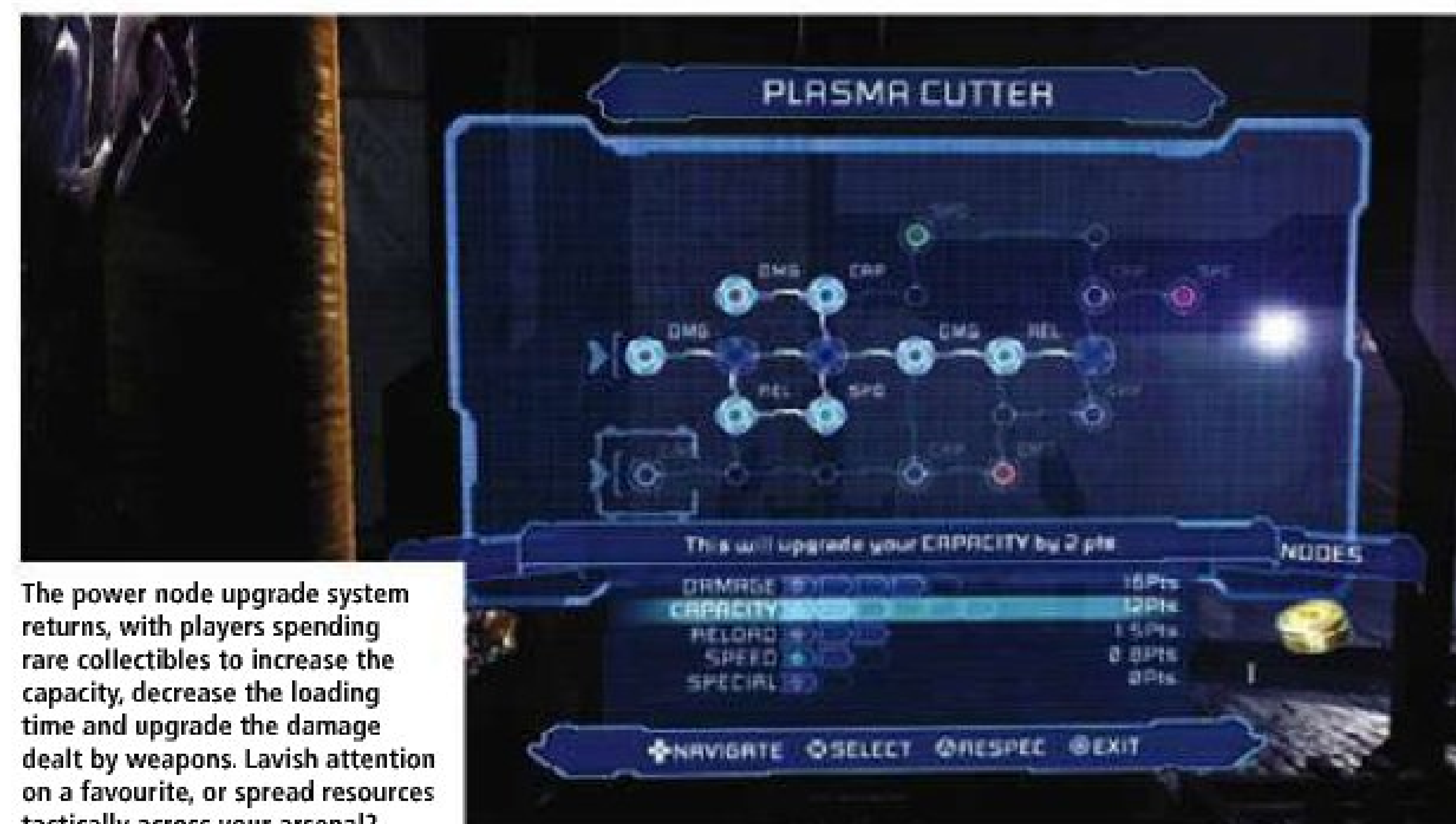
skulkers that peer around corners and charge – and others with vomit-based ranged attacks. All make use of the first game's clever conceit, that removing limbs is more lethal than countless body shots, making a virtue of sadistic dismemberment.

But new guns and enemies are not behind *Dead Space 2*'s noticeable leap in quality, which is worthy of comparison to *Uncharted*'s move from a superior first game to an outstanding second. Both games are strengthened by polish, variety and, most radically for *Dead Space 2*, likeably engaging characters. In *Dead Space* Clarke was a silent participant, his wordlessness lending the game a lean, stripped quality. This time, he spends more time free from the layered armour of his engineer's rig, and he's more vocal, reacting to The Sprawl's many scares and communicating with other characters (and one, in particular, with whom he develops a firm, believable rapport).

It's a bold step away from the first game's spare efficiency, and it pays off. Similarly, moving to The Sprawl's metropolis could have diluted the striking insulation of the original's setting. In practice, though, Clarke is still moving slowly down dark, narrow corridors, clearing infested rooms and solving satisfying mechanical puzzles. It's just that now he's doing it against a background of shops, schools and living quarters, with more frequent interruptions for grandstanding set-pieces – leaping across a broken train carriage with rocket boots, fending off a room of necromorphs while suspended from the ceiling, and fixing satellite arrays using the game's updated zero-gravity controls.

These moments provide a degree of spectacle and imagination which breaks up the otherwise overwhelmingly dank, shadowy atmosphere. But they can't prevent the game from becoming monotonous on occasion. *Dead Space 2* is at its weakest when the ideas run dry and Clarke must trudge through rooms simply and densely packed with fleshy enemies. This happens more as the end draws close – a cheap way to squeeze resources and increase difficulty that has none of the game's usual elegance.





The power node upgrade system returns, with players spending rare collectibles to increase the capacity, decrease the loading time and upgrade the damage dealt by weapons. Lavish attention on a favourite, or spread resources tactically across your arsenal?

Dead Space 2 isn't as tidily self-enclosed as its predecessor. Multiplayer stretches the experience, and a new harder-than-impossible mode unlocked after a first completion resets players to their past save after each death, giving them just three saves to use along the way. It loses something of the tough-but-contained challenge of the first game, which offered a temptingly realistic shot at 100 per cent completion and resonated with efficiency of presentation, gameplay and setting. But this is perhaps a fair price to pay for a wonderfully crafted sequel. The game's excellent controls and stream of grisly scares make it the current standard for survival horror, and it now boasts eruptions of blockbusting action that rival this generation's biggest games. **[9]**

The great convergence



While the singleplayer campaign remains essentially unchanged, *Dead Space 2* introduces radically new elements in its online multiplayer. Following the likes of *Splinter Cell* and last year's *Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood*, the horror sequel implements an asymmetrical competitive setup – the human Sprawl security forces have the same abilities as regular hero Isaac Clarke, while necromorphs puke, wall-crawl and sprint according to type. It's well balanced, with the scattered reanimated aliens spawning through vents and windows to attack the hardier and more stable humans, and while it's unlikely to trouble the big online shooters, its an excellent and faithful translation of singleplayer mechanics to a multiplayer arena.



INFINITY BLADE

FORMAT: IPHONE RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: EPIC GAMES
DEVELOPER: CHAIR ENTERTAINMENT



Blue circles allow players to navigate the predominantly linear world and engage enemies. Sometimes it's wise to take a breather, and the camera can be freely moved around to search the room for potions and treasure

Tap and slash



You can put aside most thoughts of RPGs: in between the ceaseless chains of battles, you won't be offered exploration so much as a smartly implemented hidden-object game (which sees you prodding at the touchscreen to collect money bags and health potions), and only occasionally choosing which path to take. It sounds dismal, but it plays very well, the streamlined concept built with an understanding not just of swipe controls and combos but of bus journeys, boarding queues and coffee breaks. In a smart twist, each piece of your inventory can be levelled and then traded in for a skill point when you've mastered it, adding a simple but appealing strategy element that encourages you to play dangerously, sticking with outmoded kit as you rinse it for points.

Is this the end or the beginning? It's tempting to see Epic's arrival on iOS – so quick on the heels of long-term rival id – either calling time on the scrappy bedroom ingenuity of the iPhone marketplace or heralding a strange new era in which big-budget action games compete for space on the touchscreen with treasure hunts, tile puzzles and physics toys. Whatever the case, Unreal Engine's commercial debut on Apple's hardware via Utah studio Chair has resulted in what is apparently the fastest-grossing app to date.

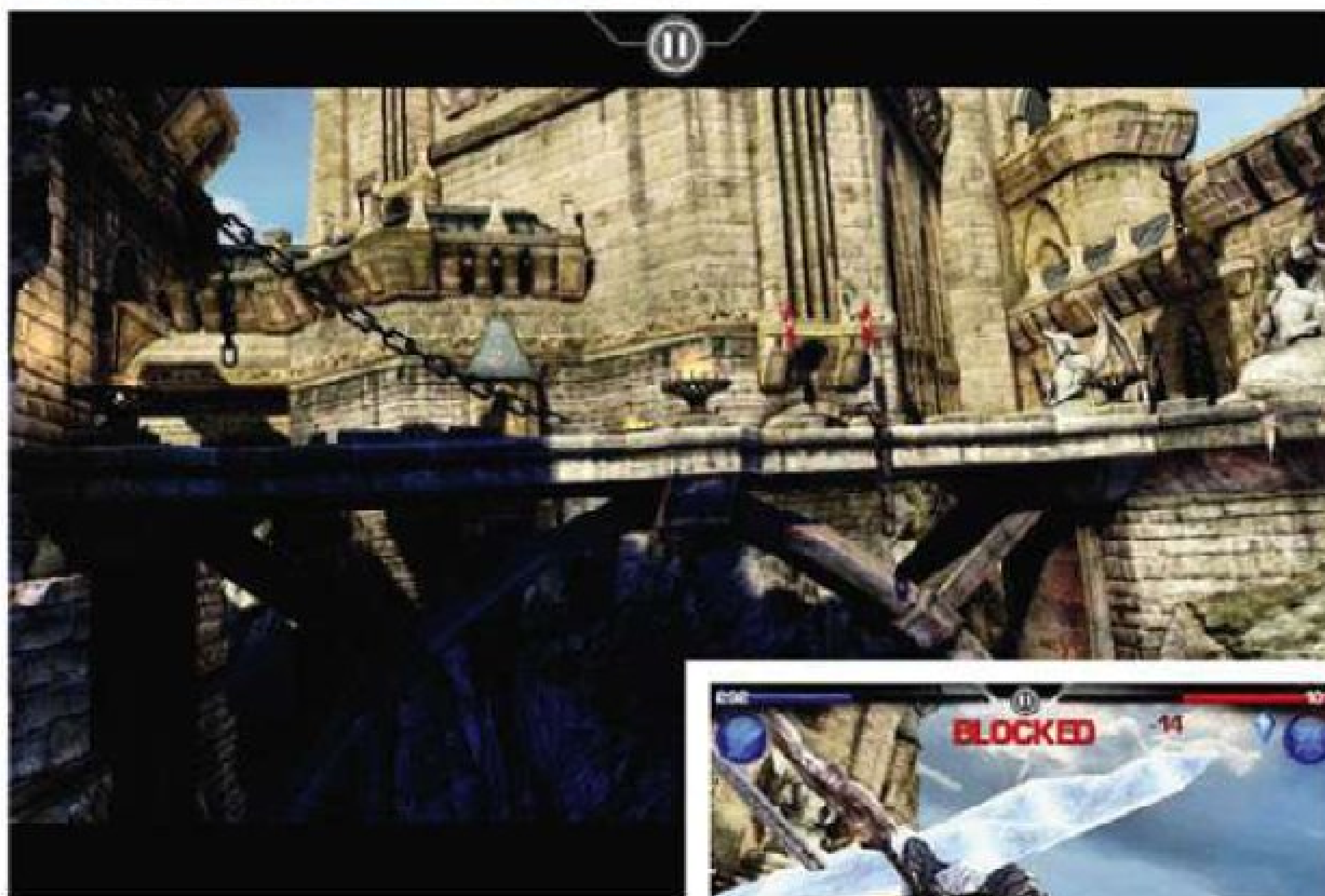
As far as the game itself is concerned, however, for *Infinity Blade* the end is the beginning, with a fleeting swordplay tutorial giving way, rather swiftly, to your hero's brutal murder at the hands of the level-50 God King. What spills outwards from that point is a tale of bloodlines, destinies and loot shopping, as generations of descendants follow, quite literally, in the first swordsman's footsteps, moving through the same locations and taking on the same ever-levelling bosses in order to avenge him – incrementally inching their own attributes higher as they go.

If it's a brave choice to make the grind of a game so fiercely geographical, it's enormously satisfying to find that this unlikely structure works. You'll know, throughout the course of your first few tours of *Infinity Blade*'s castle, that you're being set up for a fight you can't win just yet, but chances are you won't really mind. Why? Because on this flimsy structure, Chair Entertainment has hung combat of real weight and connection. It's swordplay that's both immediate and lightly tactical, more in the vein of the *Punch Out* series than any traditional action RPG.

Like the storyline, it's basic stuff. Enemy hit chains must be broken by shield blocking, dodging or parrying (since blocks are limited for each battle, the latter options are preferable, but they require learning each enemy's tells first), while on the offensive side you have directional swipes, special moves and gestural magic attacks. Throughout the action, the touchscreen controls are generally simple, responsive and intelligent (the notable exception is a pause button that's a bit too easy to accidentally nudge while dealing overhead blows), but there are still pleasant nuances to perfect. Chaining strikes together is satisfyingly tricky due to the timing required, and opening enemies up for a rare stab requires quick reflexes.

The technology's happy to pour on the detailing, but the art direction ultimately wins the day with a range of wonderfully brutal enemy and armour designs, all of which contrive to make each trip to the shops even more of a treat. Regardless of the gentle challenges, it's a simple business to settle down into the game's rhythm, at which point the levelling and equipment come to the fore, as you experiment with new items and bolster your stats.

Like *Rage*, *Infinity Blade* is a fearsome advert for a piece of middleware, but Chair's offering is smart enough to go further than that, too. The maker of *Shadow Complex* has delivered a game that's sufficiently humble to allow itself to be fundamentally shaped by serious study of the platform, yet possessed of enough self-assurance to offer weighty, bone-jarring thrills despite the thinnest of mechanics. As we wait for the first of the promised updates, then, there's plenty of reason to hope that this is the beginning, after all – the beginning of something rather special. **[8]**





Magic deals powerful damage but requires players to draw a rune on the screen without being hit. Luckily, the game's lenient when it comes to interpreting scrawls



Even if you pour upgrade points into it, your shield will only protect you for so long, so it's crucial to learn to dodge and parry right from the very beginning



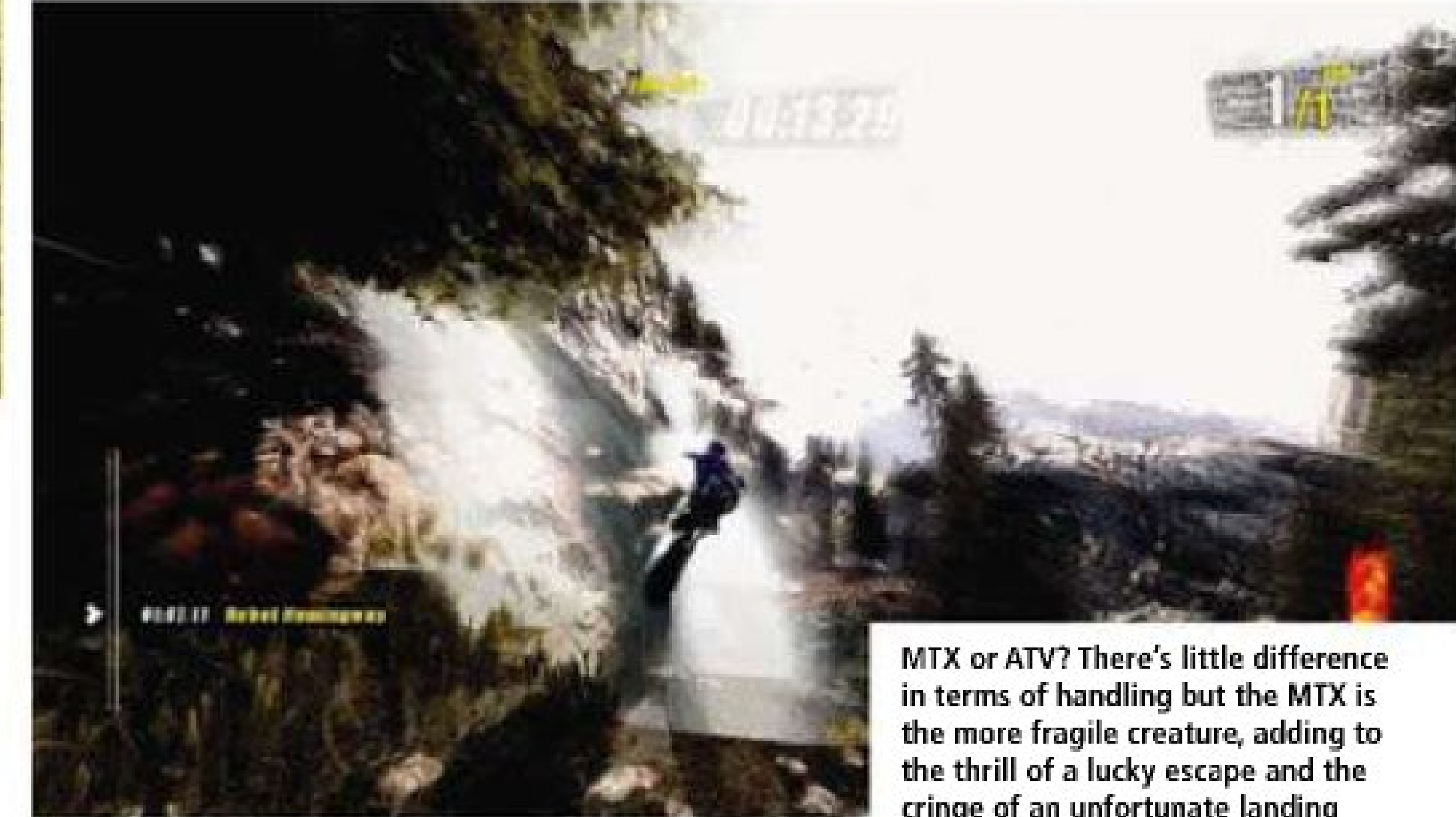


It certainly looks the part, even if it doesn't tick all the usual boxes. There's barely a flat straight in the world of *Nail'd*, the tracks twisting and turning until your eyes, and thumbs, just can't take it any more



NAIL'D

FORMAT: 360 (VERSION TESTED), PC, PS3 RELEASE: FEBRUARY 4
PUBLISHER: DEEP SILVER DEVELOPER: TECHLAND



MTX or ATV? There's little difference in terms of handling but the MTX is the more fragile creature, adding to the thrill of a lucky escape and the cringe of an unfortunate landing



The refresh period following a crash is appropriately short, diving you back into the action almost immediately. Acceleration to top speed takes little time – an encumbrance when there's a rock face around the next corner

For a decade, the offroad genre has been divided into the camps of pseudo-simulation (*Dirt*) and dedicated arcade (*Pure*). *Nail'd* screams into the latter category, ignoring what few rules there are (consistent physics, aggressive AI) and making off with reckless abandon.

The game takes minutes to master and seconds to die as you traverse the unpredictable, unforgiving circuits that hurl all manner of zany set-pieces at you and your ATV or MTX motor. Developer Techland's lack of restraint throws up some exhilarating scenarios, such as platforms suspended by hovering helicopters and suicidal routes through train yards. There's a sense of grand scale and vertiginous danger, but also of impending doom as you charge around each track like a possessed lawnmower.

Input is limited to boosting and directing your frequently airborne rider, emphasising *Nail'd* as a sightseeing tour rather than a true offroad challenge. You can't take a swipe or swing at your opponents, and you won't need to: the AI feels like it's practically placeholder, your fellow racers never posing a threat and constantly left in your tracks even after the rockiest of starts. The lack of a manoeuvrable, changeable camera speaks volumes: *Nail'd* is about moving forward constantly in search of the developer's next outrageous idea.

Flaming gates and hoops offer up boosts and coerce you into death-defying stunts that would make Evel Knievel think twice. It's a good design decision undercut by the incongruous effect of the environment, which belies *Nail'd*'s main problem: by throwing out the rulebook, Techland can't provide consistent gameplay parameters for each race. Landing on a stray branch might cause an instant combustion, while a head-on collision with a train moments later has the slightest of consequences.

Progress through the main tournament mode demands constant replaying of tracks with added variables – called 'mutators' – such as unlimited boost and removed collision. It's a grind that forces you to hop between leagues, trying out alternate routes in a bid to vary your own experience. As more tracks open up, the challenge increases slightly, but it's too little too late after the grindwork of the initial stages. The reward of new parts with which to customise your vehicle provides a minor distraction and opens up potential for even greater self-destructive speed.

For a game that harnesses some cutting-edge technology and whips along at a cracking pace, *Nail'd* misses some basic design staples. Audio, a key tool in conveying sense of place, is flat and dull. Boosting bleeds colour out of the screen rather than intensifying and heightening the experience. Worst of all are track layouts that lead you straight into unavoidable danger, forcing you to redirect your path mid-flight. Techland has played fast and loose with a genre that needs reining in to truly let pulses soar. The result is a game that's daft, sloppy fun begging for an injection of refinement. **[5]**



Boosting is a gift and a curse. While it's crucial to getting ahead of the brainless pack, it also distorts your view and reduces the lush geography to a dreary blur. The option to introduce unlimited boost 'madness' into the mix is best avoided

A flying shame

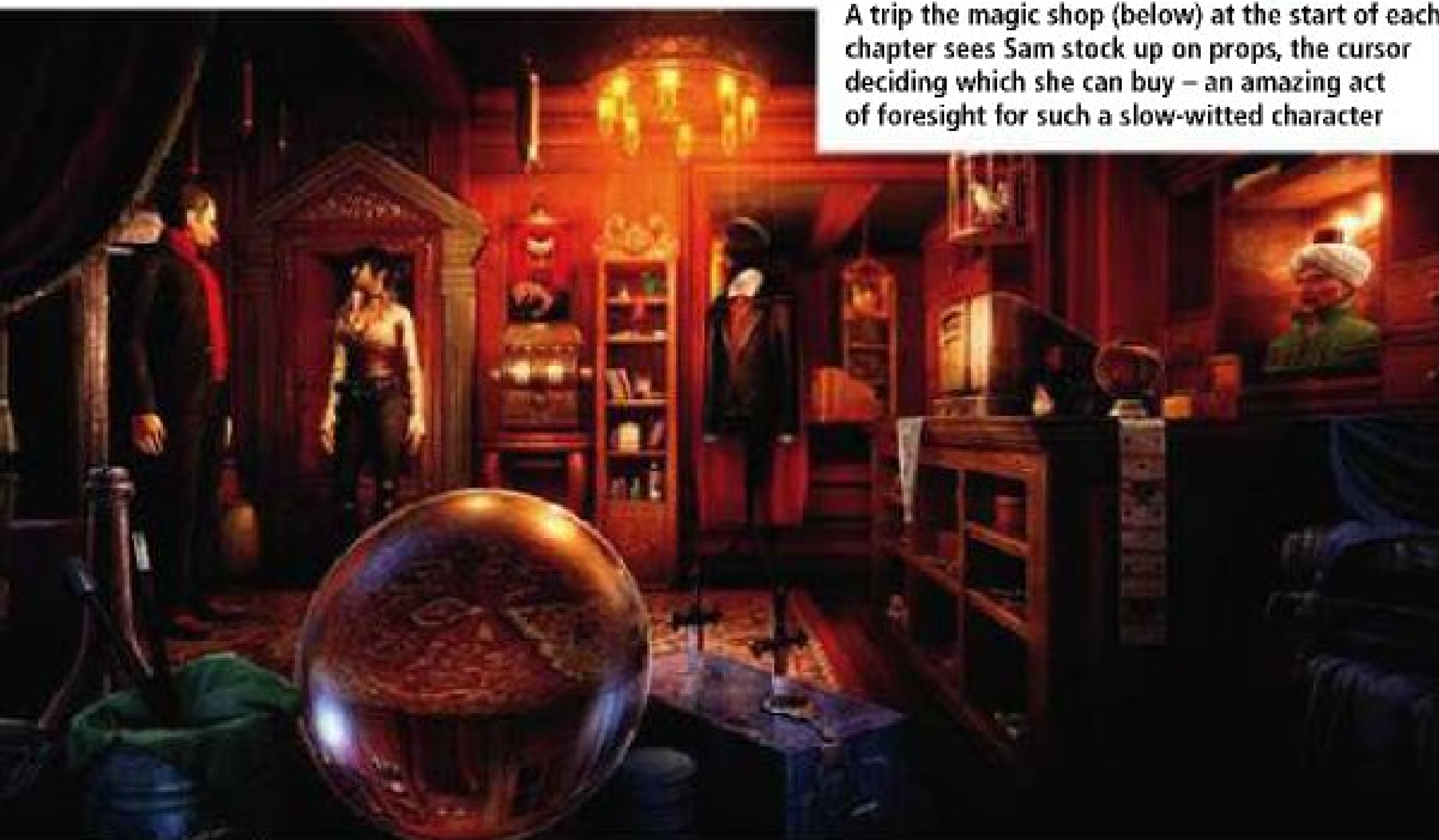


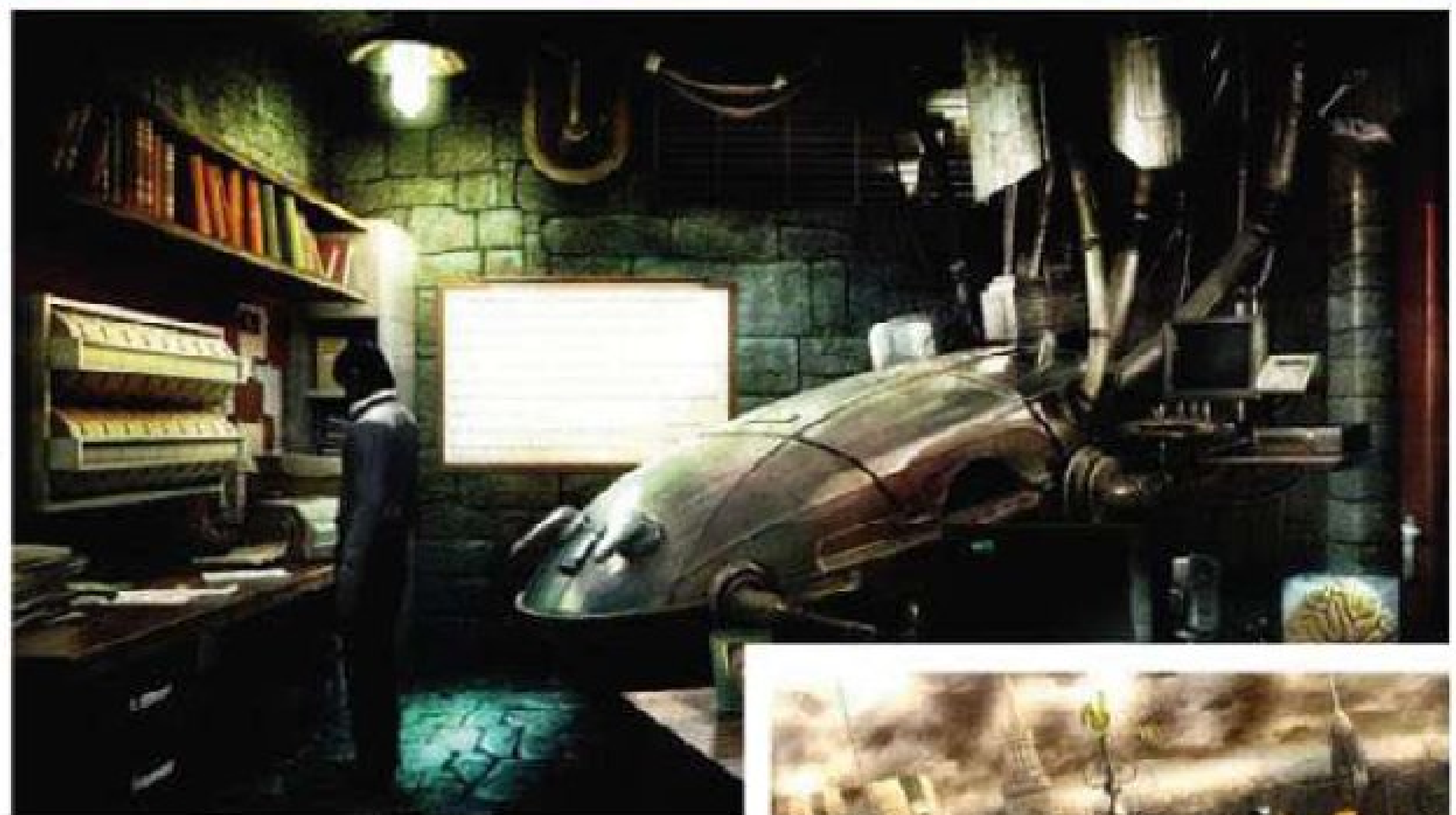
There's a limited amount of gameplay modes on offer, with the meat of the meal being a tournament mode that regurgitates scenery and demands re-runs for progress. It's a shame because it undermines *Nail'd*'s thrill-a-minute ethos; once you've dodged one wave of hot-air balloons, you've dodged them all. Elsewhere is the option to tailor your own tournament, mixing up the game's stunt, time-attack and standard races. The provision of a level editor could have been the secret to opening up *Nail'd*'s fast and furious potential.





A trip the magic shop (below) at the start of each chapter sees Sam stock up on props, the cursor deciding which she can buy – an amazing act of foresight for such a slow-witted character







GRAY MATTER

FORMAT: 360, PC (VERSION TESTED) RELEASE: FEBRUARY
PUBLISHER: DTP ENTERTAINMENT DEVELOPER: WIZARBOX



The game's split personality isn't thematic, but it might be the result of its change of developer. The cutscene quality varies, one looking like a *Phoenix Wright* game and the next simply downright ugly

Cheap tricks



A lot of *Gray Matter*'s puzzle-solving involves as much thought as turning the page of a book, especially in the rather literal sense of Sam's arsenal of parlour tricks. Her role as private investigator calls on several sleights of hand to steal, hoodwink and bribe, none more than a step removed from the scenarios in the book. A magic hat icon makes it clear when a trick's required, but only when your character's 'realised' the requirements and can actually pick up the ingredients. Conversely, trips to the magic shop see you only buy things you'll need later. The interface is a simple case of dragging items between body parts and clicking 'Manipulate' and 'Misdirect' buttons, copying the steps.

In development at one place or another for over seven years (first at Hungarian studio Tonuzaba, then Wizarbox in France), *Gabriel Knight* designer Jane Jensen's *Gray Matter* tells you more about life on the game dev's poverty line than it does its cultural touchstones. Serviceable voiceovers, lengthy cutscenes, and the effects to blend 3D characters into beautiful 2D backdrops: all feel crushingly expensive. For every flourish of animation there's a cut corner or glitch; for every exquisite music cue (by long-time collaborator, and Mr Jensen, Robert Holmes), there's a bug in the playback or wonky volume level. All is understandable – endearing, even, given the circumstances. The real problems lie elsewhere.

At the heart of *Gray Matter* are a pair of character studies involving the magic of science, the science of magic, and their historic counterparts: grief and obsession. By a twist of fate (and of a road sign on a stormy night), budding stage magician and teenage runaway Samantha Everett arrives at Dread Hill House, home to Dr David Styles, a reclusive neurosurgeon scarred mentally and physically by his wife's fatal car accident. From a house that exists as a time capsule of that day, he reluctantly looks to nearby Oxford University for help with his experiments, finding an assistant and several guinea pigs. Enter Samantha, whose singular interest in trickery leads to a rather surreal investigation into subsequent events.



Incongruities in the game's Oxford include half the phone numbers starting with '555' and an inn that brings to mind the beginning of An American Werewolf In London

It's a satisfying opening that eschews logic and plausibility for effect, played across a quasi-Victorian Oxford (though it's set in modern times) littered with puzzle boxes, agents and prominently mounted symbols for the Daedalus Club, a 'secret' society of magicians Sam contacts through a local shop owner, Mephistopheles. That plot strand, a series of literary treasure hunts, quickly wraps itself around Styles' paranormal quest. Every other day/chapter you control him, combing his environment for mementos, connections – anything to help him find his lost lover in dreams, and maybe something more.

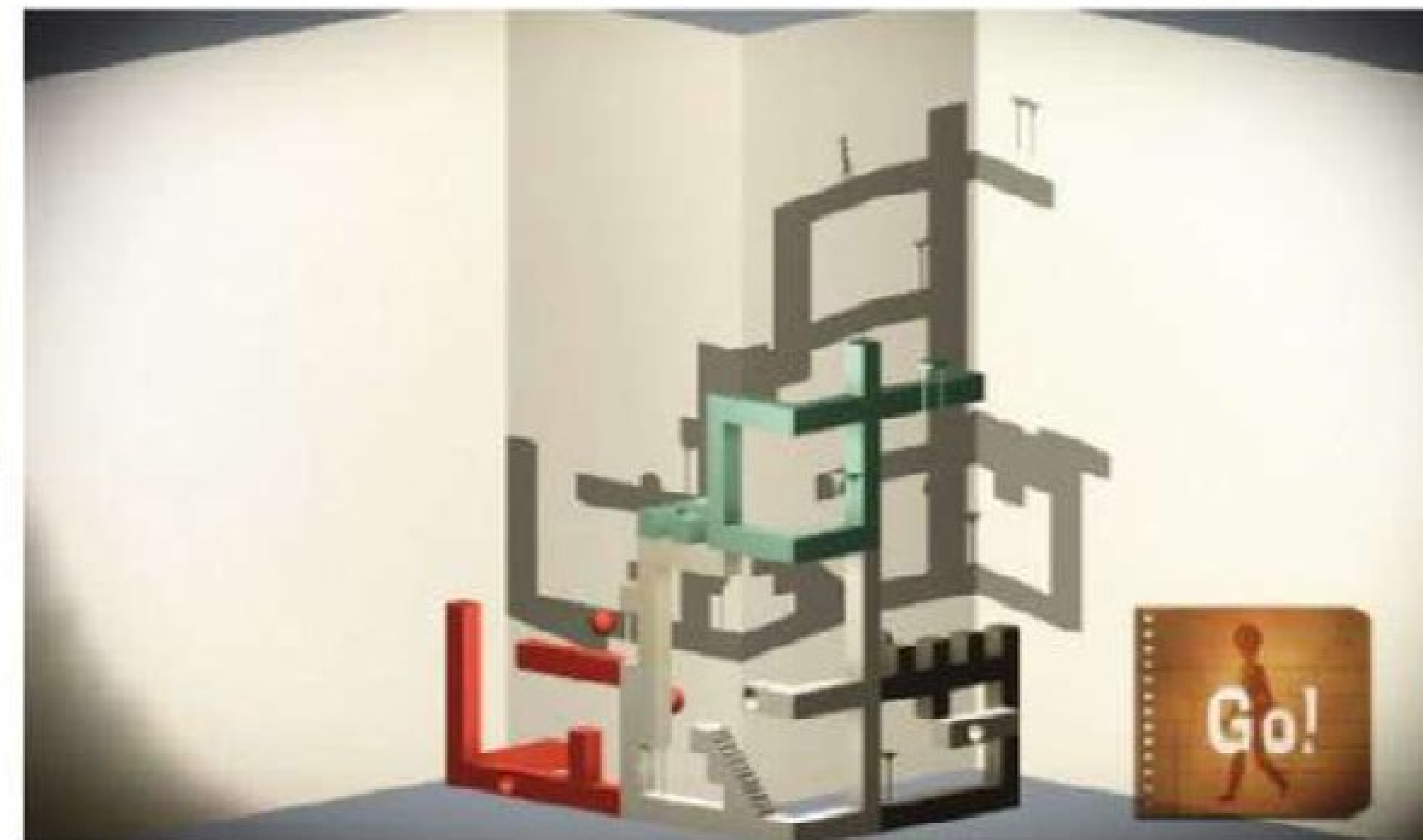
Putting aside a climax that dives headfirst into Garth Marenghi territory, perfectly smashing the fiction, Jensen could have pulled this off. There's enough atmosphere and intrigue in *Gray Matter* to survive all the madness, even in the absence of method. But its characters are unlikeable and inconsistent. Styles is as rude and objectionable as any Frankenstein, Sam's a wanton vandal, thief, liar and trespasser, and the motives and relationships of the supporting cast are the stuff of fan fiction.

Worse, the game requires very little of what its title suggests. Jensen readily admits that her first love is books, and this is her most linear game to date. If you make a leap of deduction, the game won't proceed until your character, through exhaustive dialogue choices and object examinations, has caught up. Other times, usually thanks to a signposting malfunction or outright failure, you're left flicking between locations, searching for a vital, otherwise redundant trigger. The basic navigation system is full of laudable shortcuts, but in a game dogged ironically by lack of thought, where does foresight stop and oversight begin? **[5]**





Levels regularly throw up artistic silhouettes – such as this train (left) – and sometimes give a hint as to the best route to victory. Building a gallery of silhouettes is both an obsessive compulsive's dream and nightmare





ECHOCHROME II

FORMAT: PS3 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: SCE DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE

Is light replacing time as the key ingredient in videogame experiments? If *Lost In Shadow* was a hint that working in the dark could take the platform-puzzler in a fresh direction, *Echochrome II* is the proof that it can.

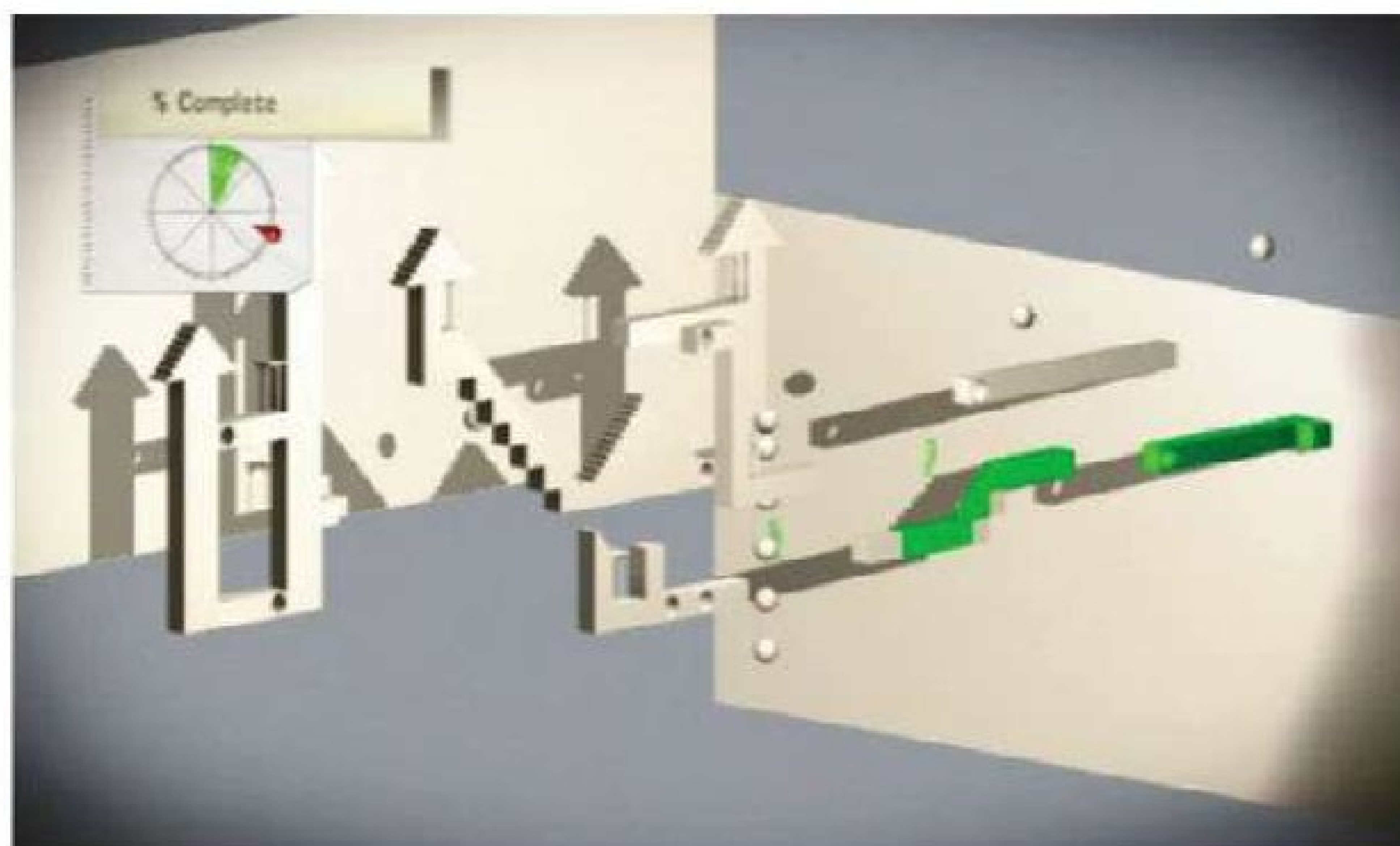
Traversing the shadows behind foreground objects, your task is to get your ever-walking 'Echo' to a goal which itself is created by the overlaying of a circular shadow and a rectangular block. The implementation of the motion controller is simple and intuitive. Holding the Move button freezes your Echo and allows you to move the light source wherever you take aim, shuffling the arrangement of shadow platforms, steps and teleporting doorways. Hopping between each plane, walking and pausing for strategic consideration becomes instinctive, and the memory games of each level mirror those of PSP spin-off *Echoshift*. Ultimately, you're playing against your own brainpower as much as the level designer's.

The sense of empowerment is partly a trick of the light, however. Some of *Echochrome*'s preset levels are so intricate and baffling that you'll rely, often with success, on random swirls of the controller to exploit your way to the end. It's appropriate that you're required to determine the exit door yourself – in many ways *Echochrome II* is less about adhering to the logic of the preset design and more about escaping any way you can. Part of the problem in later levels is the density of the overlaid blocks; even though they're rendered transparent by your harnessing of the light, their ghosting still manages to hamper visibility enough to irritate. On the other hand, when the level design is clever, it's really clever. One standout level is designed around the geometry of a padlock through which you feed your Echo like a key before unlocking the doorway to victory.

The sterility of the *Echochrome* world, with menus seemingly ripped from an architect's notebook, is countered by an uplifting and enchanting orchestral score that's a journey in itself, mirroring the emotional ups, downs and leaps of faith you go through in-game. As you waft and wave your way to the destination you'll feel like the mad, brilliant conductor of a videogame symphony.

It may be a PSN experiment, but *Echochrome II* is no flash in the pan. The team has added longevity to the game, with a level creator that lets users easily publish and share original maps, replays and high scores worldwide at the click of a few prompts. It's a polished, rounded package that is as functional as it is stylish.

Echochrome II isn't just a delightful harmony of rhythmic pace and carefully considered design, it's also the blueprint for how to build a Move game from the ground up. Down to the menus and interfaces – the glue of *Echochrome*'s world – it has been lovingly constructed with the user and the controller equally in mind. It's clever without being intimidating, delicate without being volatile, and immediate without a sense of panic. More important than all of that, though, is that the first must-have Move game has arrived. **[8]**



Paint mode remedies the series' slightly muted palette by encouraging you to fill maps with bold splashes of colour, a set hue following a character. On more intricate maps it can be even more of a challenge than the standard Escort mode

Chrome browsing



Each level can be played three different ways. Escort mode has you ferrying your Echo to the exit door, while Echo mode – which will be familiar to series veterans – sees you rescuing stray comrades littered throughout the level. Paint mode encourages to you risk lives colouring in platforms with your characters. The ability to add these game types to your homebrewed levels adds an extra layer of potential to the UGC portion of the package, and gives you the ability to throw down some sinister gauntlets to the worldwide *Echochrome* community. The developer's decision to hand over its tools to users should add weeks, if not months, to the game's life beyond its 100 preset levels.



The inability to conjure back-up mid-game is partly excused by AI characters who pop up to lend a helping hand. Friendly fire can be a bane when you're in the thick of it, however



UNDER SIEGE

FORMAT: PS3 RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: SCE
DEVELOPER: SEED STUDIOS

Bugging out



There are signs that *Under Siege* missed out on vigorous focus testing – or that its testers were soulless creatures from a gaming netherworld – but of equal concern is the number of bugs that have slipped through the QA net. Maps regularly throw up trapped enemies chasing their own tails on the spot, and the inadequately explained menu controls – particularly irksome in the map editor – raise eyebrows. It's nothing that can't be patched, but it does betray the lush production values that make the overall package stand out from much of the PSN crowd.

Realtime strategy titles may be few and far between on home consoles, but the developers that have dared to bring a typically hardcore PC genre to a broader audience have managed to set a high bar. From *Halo Wars* to *Civilization Revolution*, and more recently with *Ruse*, the challenge of paring down traditionally complex interfaces while maintaining a deep level of strategy has been conquered.

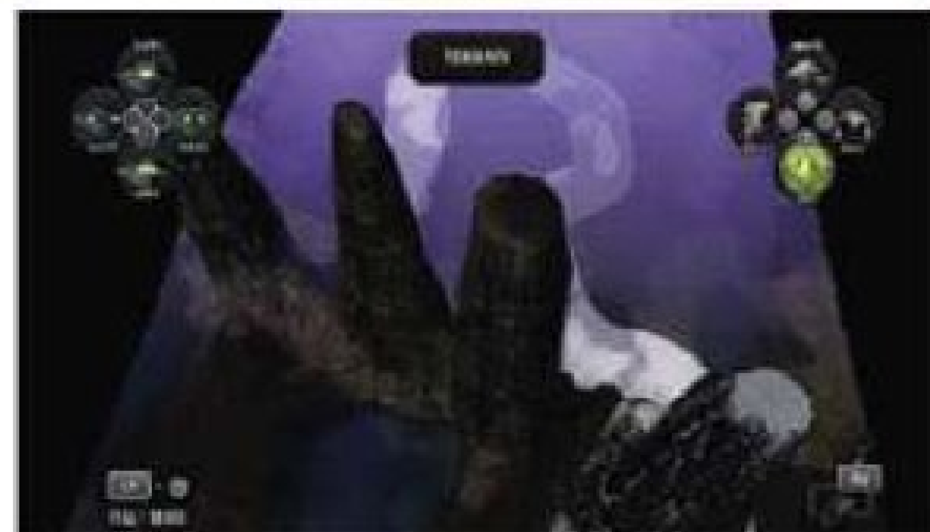
Under Siege strips even further layers away from the RTS template to the point that it almost feels like a dungeon crawler. There's no traditional base-building, you manage and carefully choose your units for each mission of attack and defence before deployment, and if you make the wrong choice… well, tough. It's closest in design and practice to last year's *Command & Conquer 4*, which itself attempted to bring console mechanics to a PC genre.

There's a varied mix of units to select – earned as you progress through the missions – with an even spread of abilities that make each one a valuable asset. Archers can heal and launch flaming arrows from afar, while soldiers can lock their shields in place to defend against aggressive assaults. Even with a neat, balanced set of troops, however, the daunting difficulty of the game sets in thick and fast. You'll fight hard to complete missions on the easiest setting, learning harsh lessons in micromanagement and pre-battle preparation as wave after wave of evenly matched enemy units rail against your team. Repeating missions is something the designers clearly anticipated, as failure can still reward vigilant, treasure-hunting players, imparting valuable funds to upgrade infantrymen on your next go.



The campaign locales are varied but do little to affect your troops besides reducing visibility. Using the terrain can help, however, with a high vantage point ideal for a rain of arrows

A thin narrative yarn has been spun around the campaign – another evil empire, another rebel alliance – and though the splash-page intermissions and storyboards are pretty enough, it does little to add any real weight or motivation to the campaign. The paradox of the game is that its art design and script targets teenagers while its stifling difficulty sets a barrier to entry far too high for its own good.



The editor offers a broad set of tools – from terraforming to individual item placement – but a more manoeuvrable camera while working would help in realising your plans

Take a well-earned break from the campaign mode and you can test the game's advanced, intricate map editor. Completing the campaign missions opens up the maps for use in this mode, allowing you to improvise with the plots of land and add your own spin. Alternatively you can start from scratch, determining everything from spawn points, environmental effects and even adding your own cutscenes. The editor is *Under Siege*'s best weapon. It's extensive and rewarding – if a little tricky to navigate due to some confusing prompts – giving you enough autonomy to counteract the unfair odds of the campaign.

Under Siege may be a downloadable game, but it's certainly not throwaway. It's engaging and, if the controls can be mastered and the bugs forgiven, a satisfying sampler of RTS thrills for the uninitiated, and a stamina test for anyone who thinks they're hard enough. **[7]**



The influences on *Under Siege* are many. In-game it looks like a sleek, HD *Warcraft III* with anime-inspired pop-up cutscenes that recall *Valkyria Chronicles*. Units resemble all manner of Tolkien, Lucas and Blizzard creations



NI NO KUNI: SHIKKOKU NO MADOUSHI

FORMAT: DS RELEASE: OUT NOW (JAPAN), TBC (US, UK)
PUBLISHER: LEVEL 5 DEVELOPER: LEVEL 5/GHIBLI STUDIOS

If *Ni No Kuni* hadn't been made by Japan's preeminent animation house; if it hadn't been developed by the creators of the effortlessly elegant *Layton*; if it didn't come with a free 350-page embossed hardbound book, lavishly illustrated with woodcut-style pictures, what would it be like? It would be exactly like a hundred other games.

Strip away the hype, and the expectation, and there are times when *Ni No Kuni: Shikkoku No Madoushi* (*Second Land: The Jet-Black Mage*) feels like just another Japanese RPG. As you steer the modest young hero, Oliver, on an adventure that takes him from his home town of Hotroit to the second world of the title; as you wander through each town, helping the inhabitants; as you venture out into the world map with all its wandering monsters; as you stop off at every dungeon and destroy each boss; as your party members dance their little victory dance after each battle; as you inch closer and closer to saving the princess, you get the sense that this template could have been lifted from any one of so many similar titles.

But *Ni No Kuni* is a game that resists any attempt to strip away the surrounding hype and circumstance. It is a game that demands to be played in context – the context of the heavyweight creative collaboration that brought the game to fruition, and the heavyweight brick-sized book that transforms the game into a very tangible experience.

Surprisingly, the influence of that collaboration feels understated – after all, Level 5 has its own track record in creating believable worlds, and, in terms of character design and story, this doesn't feel too different from previous titles. But there's a glimpse of the Ghibli touch in the way that complex, adult problems are presented from a child's perspective, for example, and the way that those problems are framed within and rationalised by their relation to a fantastical world (as in the best fairytales, from The Snow Queen to Pan's Labyrinth).

The most interesting thing about the game, though, is the way that the fantastical world in question is given physical presence in the real world. It comes in a box that's like something from the glory days of PC gaming – the size of a shoebox and containing what is best described as a grimoire: hardback, doorstop-sized and sumptuously designed. Not only does the book present a teasing glimpse of what's to come – the world and the things that inhabit it and the ways it might open up – it is also an essential component of the game, providing clues and solutions to the puzzles and problems, and a list of the runes that you need to sketch out to make magic work.

This, from a practical point of view, isn't ideal. It's not the sort of thing that you can whip out on a busy train, and even sitting on the sofa it feels like you need three hands to hold the book open while sketching out a tricky incantation with your stylus. But when even the smell of the pages feels somehow magical, it's difficult not to feel like a killjoy for being critical. And, in fact, that's true of the entire production. *Ni No Kuni* really is a game of two worlds. If you're not willing to suspend your inner curmudgeon, you'll probably be left disappointed by a succession of minor flaws. But if you're willing to release your inner kid, you'll enjoy a game that conjures up a child's-eye view of a rich and believable fantasy world. **[8]**





There's a ton of minigame knick-knacks to explore, including an item synthesis system. Budding alchemists are well served by lots of starter recipes in the book



The Ghibli influence is most evident in the character and audio design and, of course, the cutscenes – although fans of acclaimed anime will be disappointed to learn that there are fewer of these than you might expect



Obviously, if you're thinking of importing the game, learn Japanese first. Or wait for the western release so you can get the full benefit of that 350-page grimoire

Mainstream magic



Anyone expecting *Ni No Kuni* to give the RPG genre a makeover of the magnitude that *Professor Layton* achieved for the adventure game is likely to be disappointed – it simply lacks the elegant mainstream appeal of *Layton*. It's difficult to imagine too many housewives or grandmothers willing to put up with the relentless random encounters, for example, and the commuting crowd are going to find it difficult to search for a rune that lets them talk to the animals while their nose is wedged under someone else's armpit on the 7:51 to Liverpool Street (and even time-pressed, multi-tasking hardcore gamers will find it tricky to manage while sitting on the throne, say). But then stranger things have happened – not least in the world of gaming, whose image Nintendo has worked so relentlessly to reshape.



999: NINE HOURS, NINE PERSONS, NINE DOORS

FORMAT: DS RELEASE: OUT NOW (US), TBA (UK)
PUBLISHER: AKSYS GAMESA DEVELOPER: CHUNSOFT

Imagine an illustrated script to a Saw film, but with the grisly scenes of self-mutilation removed and some number puzzles put in their place, and you're a fair way towards grasping the nature of *Nine Hours, Nine Persons, Nine Doors*. Nine people are kidnapped by a gas-mask-wearing mystery man and awaken in a heavily modified cruise ship. To escape, they must co-operate to solve a series of locked-room puzzles – they have nine hours to do this, or the ship will sink. And if they ignore any of their captor's arbitrary rules, a bomb placed in each of their small intestines will explode.

It's a gripping premise, and that's no bad thing, for the game itself is more interactive novel than full-blown adventure title. Much of the time you'll be reading vast chunks of well-localised but occasionally bland exposition and dialogue, infrequently punctuated by questions to answer and decisions to make. To Chunsoft's credit, these choices have tangible impact on the player's experience – you'll need multiple playthroughs to see every puzzle and unravel every mystery – but still, they're spaced shockingly far apart. At times, the gap between one interaction and the next is positively Kojima-esque: one piece of exposition, early on, takes the best part of an hour to conclude.

When they do occur, the locked-room puzzles are satisfying challenges. They're self-contained – items found in a room will be used there – avoiding the contrived combinations many adventure games wring out of a persistent inventory. Solutions are often too heavily hinted at by your companions, however, such is the game's desire to rush to the next twist in its engaging conspiracy. And how content you are to be a passenger on *999*'s mystery cruise will define how much you enjoy it – there's a solid adventure title here, but it's spread thin over a densely written airport thriller. **[6]**



As with all the best thrillers involving a diverse group of strangers thrown together, internal strife among the participants emerges quickly enough

Every character has a bracelet with a number on it. Many puzzles hinge on using the 'digital root' of numbers, the product of repeatedly iterated addition, eg 6+7+3=16, 1+6=7





EAT THEM

FORMAT: PS3 RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: SCE
DEVELOPER: FLUFFY LOGIC



Eating helpless civilians will power up your monster, but getting your paws on them isn't as easy as you'd expect

While razing buildings usually forms a peripheral part of videogames, it's rarely less than enjoyable. Placing wholesale destruction at the centre of a game, and casting you in the body of a towering monster charged with carrying it out, is an enticing pitch.

Fluffy Logic has come up with a coherent package. The comic-book visuals are well crafted and suit the B-movie storyline perfectly. There's a healthy portion of wit injected, and an effort to provide mission variety, even when it sits oddly with the premise (if racing, you'll fail if you destroy too much property, for example). There are some other good ideas on show: medals, for example, unlock prosthetic limb weapons which can be pieced together in the Monster Lab to fashion your own creation.

Unfortunately, it doesn't take long for multiple irritations to rear their heads and roar. Difficulty is uneven from the off; some levels dish out easy gold medals on the first attempt, others will show you the fail screen multiple times before you scrape a bronze. Frequently, much of the blame for this lies with the HUD, which has objective pointers that disappear behind text boxes, and vanish altogether when you get near a target, even if it's not yet onscreen. Races, in particular, become frustrating tests of memory rather than skill.

The Monster Lab is initially entertaining, but there's little to call between many of the permutations. An arbitrarily imposed (and insufficiently obvious) border to the game area frequently prevents you from pushing between it and nearby buildings, resulting in a bottleneck. Swiping up humans is frustratingly imprecise, as is a smashing dynamic which often leaves you wondering which bit of a building you've yet to hit in order to fully reduce it to rubble.

The core idea of *Eat Them* is sound, and when it works it's undeniable fun; there's a definite pleasure in starting with a pristine, ordered city and methodically reducing it to rubble. But constantly butting up against so many small annoyances and irritations means that *Eat Them* often offers an experience less like Godzilla on the rampage and more akin to Godzilla on the Brooklyn Bridge: hamstrung and impotent. **[5]**



It may bring to mind SNK's *King Of The Monsters* games, but there's no versus fighting here, and the city destruction is a more enjoyable spectacle



GHOST TRICK: PHANTOM DETECTIVE

FORMAT: DS RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPER: CAPCOM PREVIOUSLY IN: E216

Shu Takumi's first project since *Ace Attorney* leaves the courtroom but continues to deal with nine tenths of the law: possession. Recently deceased, Sissel has one evening to solve his murder with poltergeist powers. Where Wright exposed past events with inanimate evidence, Sissel rewrites the future using the very same items. Activated in the correct sequence, fridges, televisions and toilets can distract assassins or prevent giant roast chickens from crushing diners below.

Levels are self-contained point-and-click adventures, albeit without any pockets to line with needless inventory. Stripped of this bulk, the puzzles are elegant and to the point. From the clutter of each environment we tease Heath Robinson-style contraptions. To the passer-by it's a suit of armour and a globe; to Sissel a machine to catapult a pill into the mouth of a dying man. If solutions are easily found through trial and error, the creative payoff offers a pleasing sense of achievement.

Where *Ace Attorney* felt like a good yarn in desperate need of a game, *Ghost Trick* cleverly weaves its narrative around the puzzles. While personable company, Sissel is merely a bodiless perspective point through which Takumi shows the bigger picture. Whether eavesdropping on conversations or sneaking into new locations – Sissel can travel down telephone lines – we are privy to many parts of a larger puzzle. Magically whipping from one place to the next also lends tremendous speed.



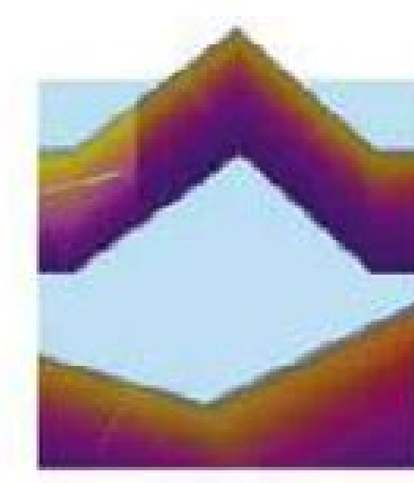
Sissel's progress is guided by an internal monologue that notes pertinent interactions and slyly hints when they are used out of sequence. The guidance is appreciated, preventing the frustrating stretches of failed experimentation that could dog *Ace Attorney*

A victim of the pace is Takumi's trademark dialogue. This is not a talky game. But what is lost in showy vocal gymnastics is gained in a beautiful animation style that tells us everything we need to know about a character, from a flamboyant flick of a coat or a lethargic cock of a shotgun. Movement brings to mind the rotoscoping of *Another World*, only decked out in Takumi's primary colours and outlandish hairdos to create one of the sharpest-looking DS games to date.

How apt that interactivity and fiction should finally merge in a fiction about interactions. The dead are restored, and the genre with them. **[8]**

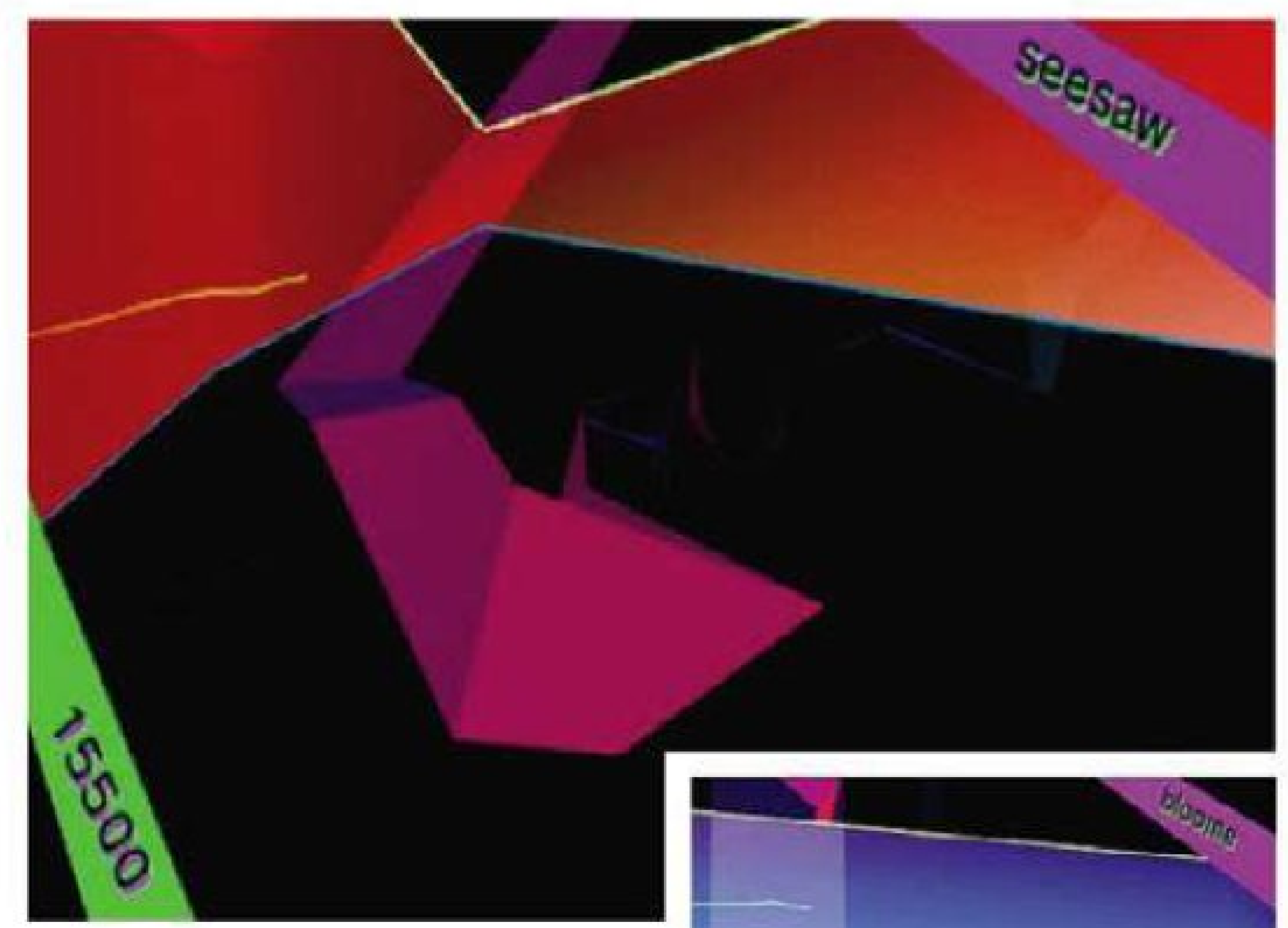


The characters are quite brilliant, from this pelvic-thrusting detective to a short-sighted assassin and hyperactive Pomeranian. Yes, the dead can speak to animals. Whether they can get them to shut up is quite a different matter



LILT LINE

FORMAT: IPHONE, WII (VERSION TESTED) RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: GAIJIN GAMES DEVELOPER: DIFFERENT CLOTH

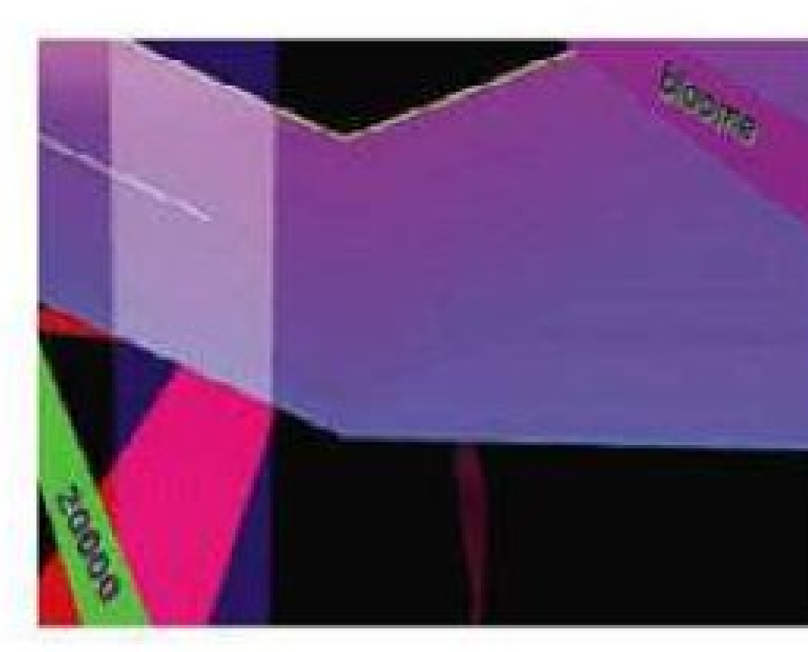




The cursor is largely pretty responsive, although on at least one level a sharp turn demanded us to drive the line on an upwards trajectory at an angle greater than the maximum we could actually express by tipping the Remote

There is often a certain elegance in simplicity. Sometimes there isn't. *Lilt Line*, for example, seems like a mechanic in search of a game – a momentary diversion of colour and sound designed to occupy the space between bus stops. On the larger screen, its stripped-back beat-matching will leave you tapping your foot – but out of impatience as much as approval of its grimy dubstep.

This is rhythm action improvised from the most basic elements – some beats, a button and an accelerometer. Leaving an undulating line in your wake, you guide a cursor through a coloured space by tipping your controller, tapping a button in time with the beat. Every mistimed press and every collision with the walls of this abruptly angled space tears off a chunk of score – reach zero and you have to start again. There's little that is appallingly wrong with this formula, but neither is there anything especially interesting or rewarding about it. The game's difficulty is its most notable feature, with the subsequent ricochets from a single collision easily ripping scores in half. The high-level challenge is, by itself, a poor reason to exist, and the game does little else to encourage persistence, locking you into a rigid progression of levels that gives you no alternative but to plunge on to a difficulty spike again and again.



The structure consists of a list of levels unlocked in turn – each with its own geometric quirks and dubstep track. The music would sound better without the honking caused by errors, though

Though *Lilt Line* doesn't stray far from the music game psychedelia established by the likes of *Lumines*, its punchy, jagged strips of graduated colour well match the squawks and purring rumbles of the soundtrack. But what amounts to the game itself is too insubstantial, and, in its difficulty, obstructs the appreciation of its aesthetic accessories. There's certainly space for a short-form rhythm action game on the Wii, but here, pared back to the genre's crude shapes, the attraction is baseline, when it really should be the bassline. **[4]**


XBOX 360
HITMAN

TIME EXTEND

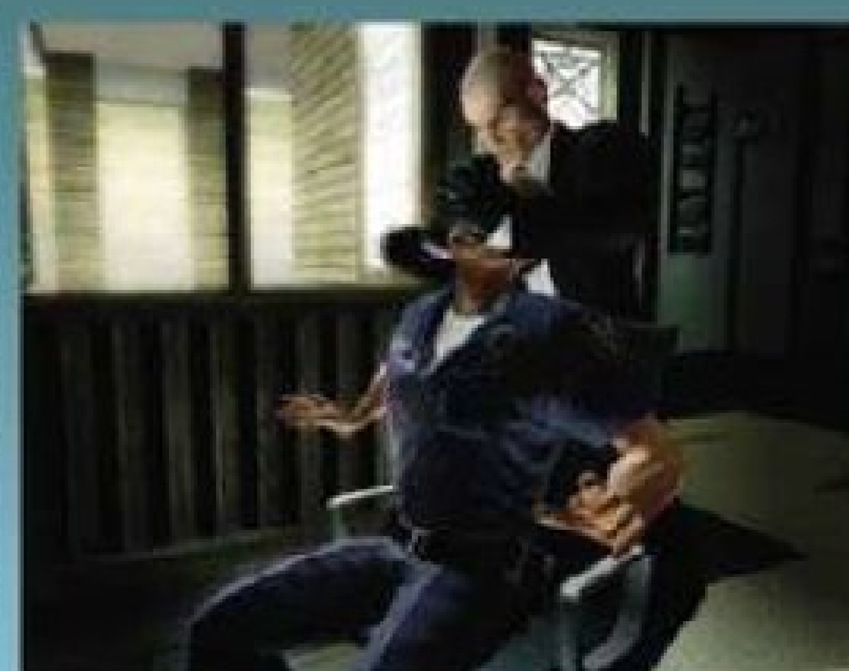
HITMAN: BLOOD MONEY

FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **EIDOS**
DEVELOPER: **IO INTERACTIVE**
ORIGIN: **DENMARK**
RELEASE: **2006**

IO Interactive's murder simulator took a few iterations to find its feet, but once it did, the result was remarkable



Agent 47 instinctively hides any weapon behind his back when there's someone in front of him. It completely mystifies the guards





Copenhagen-based IO Interactive only had to make one *Hitman* game to prove the concept's potential, and two to make it a commercial success. But it took three slightly confused iterations before its promise was completely fulfilled with the fourth, *Hitman: Blood Money*. The series only improved incrementally, but when its strengths hit critical mass, the difference was profound.

The fact that the studio had four opportunities to get *Hitman* right was a function of its intrinsic appeal: for every pundit condemning games as murder simulators, there are 10,000 bloodthirsty customers wishing they were. *Hitman* is, and even when only a handful of its levels have anything to do with that concept (as in the first game), it's enough.

The first level of the original, released as a demo, established the template. A few streets, a park and a suitcase sniper rifle. The targets arrive by limousine and meet at a predetermined time. The rest is a simulator: anyone can be killed; any set of clothes is a potential disguise; guards react to suspicious behaviour; and any witness will run for help.

Ironically, killing is about the only part of the equation that isn't especially interesting. The experience of *not* being shot at was a new one, and is still refreshing today. Until you attack, you're free to roam the area of operation, observe routines and plan an approach. It gives the breathing room required to inspire creative play.

That was true of the first mission, but not of many others in the original game. By the time it had you sprinting through a poorly rendered jungle with an M60, still wearing your suit and tie as you mowed down soldiers and searched for a tribal artefact, the game seemed to have completely lost track of what it was trying to do.

Even as late as the third game, *Contracts*, too many missions took place in restricted areas, giving you no time or space to plan an approach. It reduced the formula to a more traditional protagonist-vs-enemies relationship, rather than a network of individually intelligent agents.

Anyone can be killed; any set of clothes is a potential disguise; guards react to suspicious behaviour; and any witness will run for help

***Blood Money* saw** it all finally click together. Whether by serendipity or a conscious design decision on the part of IO, nearly every level in the game gives you a generous public area to start in, undisguised, to reconnoitre your objectives and plan your attack. Even when your target is the Vice President of the United States and your hunting ground is the White House, a public tour lets you case the mission area unharassed.

Some of the series' most creative tactics arise naturally from its various systems, and others are specifically hard-coded to work. The latter usually revolve around poisoning something or fitting a bomb to it – both special options only available in the intended spot. They amount to a puzzle solution for each mission: figure out where you're supposed to use this special element and you'll be rewarded with a clean kill.

Blood Money rejects that template in two ways. First, most of the

Hiding a corpse is useful if you're trying to avoid alerts. It only gets critical, though, if you've taken their clothes. Controlling the spread of information about your disguise is life-and-death







previously scripted solutions became standardised tools and usable anywhere. You bring poison, sedatives and remotely triggered explosives to every mission. The former can be applied to any food or drink, and the latter can be fixed to any flat surface.

The previously rare chance to hide a gun in a box of groceries also became a universal system whereby any small firearm or explosive can be hidden in any portable container. And the game added new systems, so rather than simply drop items, you can throw them, be that away from guards, over metal detectors or, in the case of kitchen knives, at people.

Second, the mission-specific approaches where the game deviates from pure simulation expanded. So you can replace a prop with a real pistol to assassinate an opera singer; soak a woman's underwear in ether to knock out a lecherous bodyguard when he sniffs them; and use a mobile's redial to call a well-guarded target in a casino, forcing him outside.

More importantly, there are also a greater number of them. Every mission seems to have been designed several times over, and the concept of one 'solution' to a particular kill no longer applies. Instead, each has enough specifically scripted opportunities that any grimly comic notion you had for arranging a death is likely to be possible.

In the early games, the AI characters were obstacles to inventive play, the rules for when they would see through a disguise deeply obtuse. And since running in the presence of such characters triggered an alert, they ultimately functioned as hair-trigger traffic cops. *Blood Money* doesn't make them entirely logical creatures, but its AI errs on the side of stupidity rather than omniscience.

That slow-wittedness meshes satisfyingly with the other mechanics. One hit can be performed by hiding a bomb in a suitcase, then throwing it over a barricade into the target's high-security private lounge. The guards rub their chins, but they won't shoot you for something that isn't immediately criminal. The fatal blast that follows is, to their intentionally simple minds, completely unrelated.

It's a wise compromise – the peace is always fragile in *Hitman*. One guard opening fire generally causes a fatal chain reaction: the sound draws attention, which turns to the player regardless of disguise. At some point in the series, IO realised that watching a guard miss your obvious crime was a more entertaining failure than being shot for no comprehensible reason.

As well as reconfiguring the AI's failings, *Blood Money* expanded its capabilities. Not its capability to hunt



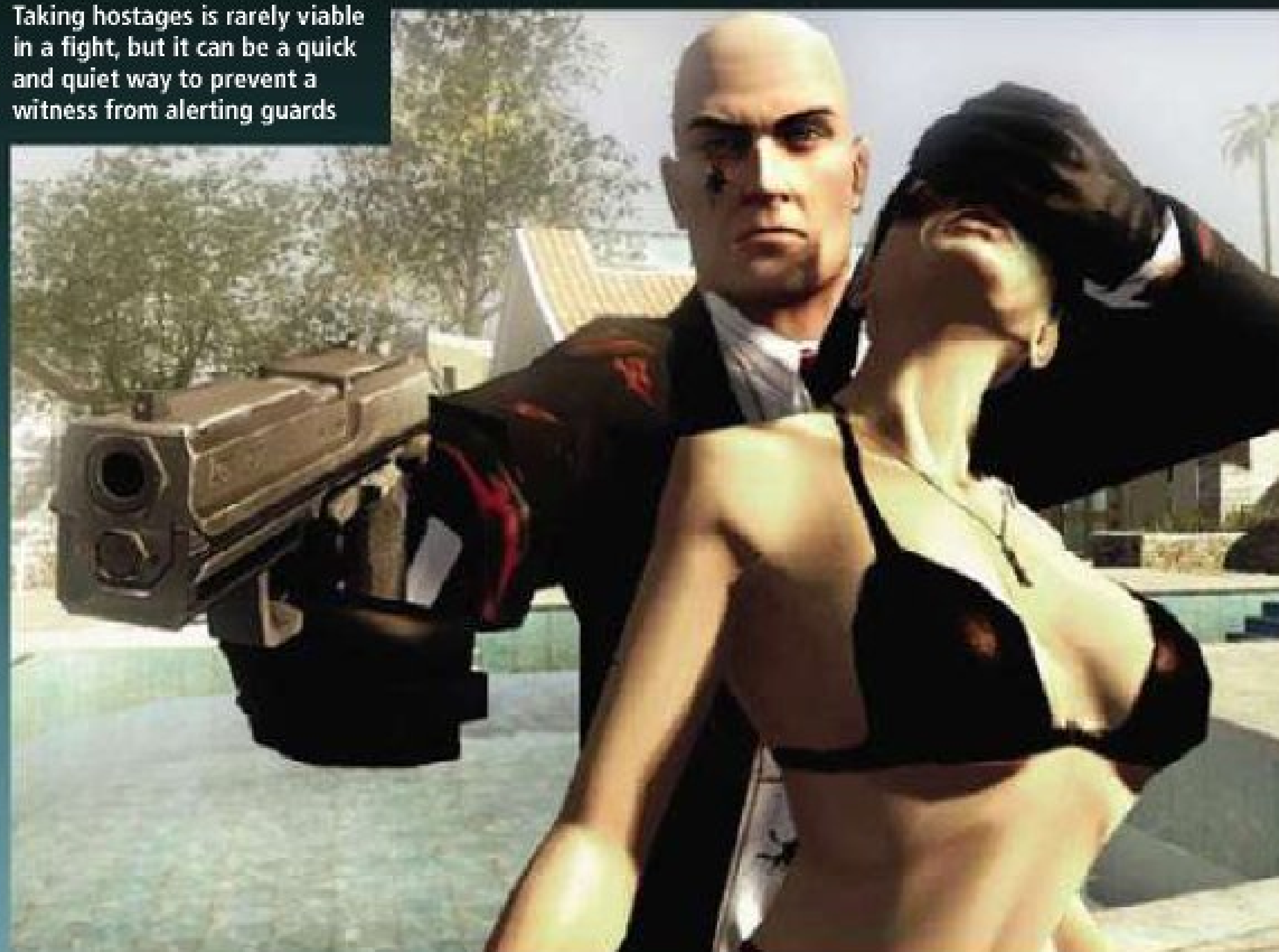
THE PLOT THINS

Most of the early *Hitman* games' painful weak spots – including the dismal jungle section in the original – came from misjudged attempts to make the missions fit a story. *Blood Money's* plot barely affects your actual hits, except in two places. One is a minor diversion to rescue an agent from a rehab clinic during an early mission; the other is a final level so artfully obtuse that some players are still unaware it's even playable. Moments before cremation at his own funeral, Agent 47 can be awoken by you mashing the controls – and then goes on to escape. Anyone who didn't try that technique left the game on what appears to be an extraordinary downer.









Taking hostages is rarely viable in a fight, but it can be a quick and quiet way to prevent a witness from alerting guards

you, but its capability to interact with other elements of the simulation. NPCs can recognise and pick up suspicious objects, bag dead bodies, and take both to the nearest security office. It doesn't make them more effective, just more manipulable. You can intentionally leave a bomb for the guards to find, wait for one to take it away, garrotte his partner in his absence, then click the detonator.

It adds up to giving the player a wider range of ways to play, without straying outside of the broad theme of stealth. Yet *Hitman* is a social stealth game, about avoiding suspicion rather than detection. Unlike *Thief* and *Splinter Cell*, the player isn't forced into hiding by his inability to fight well; in fact, during most missions, it's perfectly possible to kill every guard on sight. That players typically don't is a reflection of how engaging the deception fantasy is, and how awkward the combat can be.

The series has always struggled to fit a story around that kind of play, most embarrassingly by centring the second game on the abduction of a priest Agent 47 had inexplicably befriended. *Blood Money*'s plot is less risible, told in flashbacks during a journalist's interview with a retired spook, but still virtually unrelated to your missions, and serving primarily as a framing device in which to set a series of murderous vignettes.

The vignette analogy holds up in another respect: almost every mission has a pronounced art style of its own. One captures the hazy heat of a sleepy LA neighbourhood, another revolves around two preposterously lavish heaven and hell parties, and one packs the streets of New Orleans with a swarming crowd of the kind normally considered completely beyond the means of a high-fidelity game's performance budget.

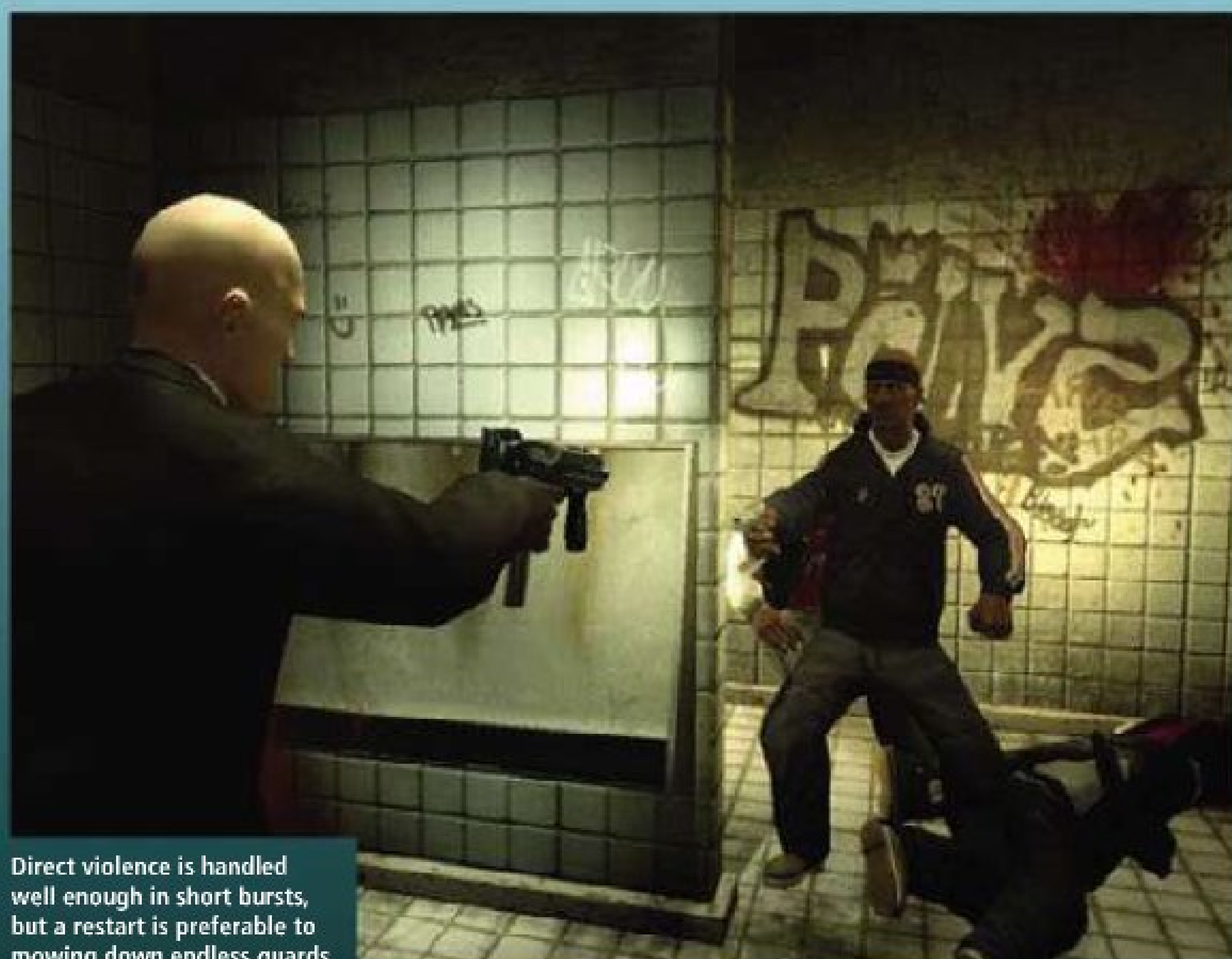
The people, too, are distinctively stylised, their bodies exaggerated to the point of being grotesque. It's not unusual to see oversized breasts in a videogame, but the *Hitman* series doesn't make them look sexy. Female faces are puckered and sour, and tend to wear the same furious scowl as the burly guards. They look the way an angry, asexual sociopath would see them: disgustingly oversexualised and hostile with it. Almost every conversation you hear is about sex and sexuality, and most are idiotic or repugnant in some way. And the physical exaggeration extends to the males, too: virtually the only person in the game who isn't ripped to the point of absurdity is Santa Claus.

None of your kills can be justified as self-defence or excused by the context of a war, and yet it's hard to feel bad about any of them

It's not a motif you necessarily keep in mind as you play, but it projects Agent 47's stormy outlook on yours. It's impossible to like or empathise with anybody in the game, and you're automatically an outsider in every situation. *Hitman: Contracts* did this by setting almost every mission during a rainstorm at night, but *Blood Money*'s method of dissociation is smarter, more effective, and doesn't constrain the art style of the levels.

Disturbingly, it helps. *Hitman* is one of the few games in which your violence is transgressive rather than reactionary. None of your kills can be justified as self-defence or excused by the context of a war, and yet it's hard to feel bad about any of them – hard to feel much of anything, in fact, beyond grim satisfaction.

The series succeeded because the most bloodthirsty gamers wanted a murder sim. Once IO made one like *Blood Money*, it turns out some of the rest of us did too.



Direct violence is handled well enough in short bursts, but a restart is preferable to mowing down endless guards



DRAG DOLLS

The original *Hitman* was novel for a lot of reasons, one of them technological: it provided an early example of convincing ragdoll physics. For *Hitman*, it isn't a question of fidelity or visual flair – it ranks among the few games where the location of a corpse after death has functional significance, particularly if you plan to steal its clothes. Unfortunately, while the physics felt solid – at least for the time – the control method was hardly convenient: you dragged corpses behind you, so trying to push one down a sewer grate was a sad hunchbacked tango. The later games' solution to the problem? Simply to stop asking you to put stiffs down sewer grates.





THE MAKING OF... THE LAST EXPRESS

Jordan Mechner turned back time in a point'n'click classic that could be chuffing its way to Hollywood

FORMAT: **MAC, PC** PUBLISHER: **BRØDERBUND** DEVELOPER: **SMOKING CAR PRODUCTIONS** ORIGIN: **US** RELEASE: **1997**

In 1952, Swiss author Friedrich Dürrenmatt published The Tunnel, a bleakly surreal short story about a train trapped in a tunnel that refuses to end. As the lights flicker and the carriages gather speed, the frightened passengers refuse to admit anything's wrong. The only exception is a corpulent, cigar-chomping student who realises the horror of the situation: they're heading towards an unspecified, existential catastrophe. "What shall we do?" screams the train's conductor in the final lines. "Nothing," replies the student with sudden serenity. Fate, he realises, isn't open to negotiation.

Jordan Mechner's 1997 adventure game *The Last Express* captures a similar sense of impending doom. Set on The Orient Express on the eve of World War I, it sends you hurtling along the tracks from Paris to Constantinople surrounded by Russian anarchists, German arms dealers, British spies and Serbian secret police.



Did the early-20th-century backdrop hurt sales? "We lost all the young people who didn't know about WWI and couldn't even find Austria on a map," reckons Moran

With its opulent visuals and art nouveau style, if Toulouse-Lautrec had designed games, they would have looked like this

You often feel harried by events beyond your control. As soon as your character, American doctor Robert Cath, arrives on the train, he's embroiled in the murder of his old friend (your first decision: stash the bloody corpse or throw it out the window?), and, as the story progresses, the intrigue closes around you like a steel trap. Confined within a couple of claustrophobic sleeping cars, you can't get off the train until Cath either dies or solves the mystery. Talk about existential dread.

It's a feeling that Mechner credits his co-writer Tomi Pierce, who died last year, with creating. "So much of the game's special character comes from her sense of the poetic and European culture," Mechner says. "We talked a lot about this generation that was plunged into war and lost its innocence. Being steeped in those cultural references cast a shadow over a lot of the characters in the story, a shadow that they're not yet aware of."

The Last Express is a Fabergé egg of a videogame. With its opulent visuals and art nouveau style, it has incredible self-confidence. If Toulouse-Lautrec had designed games, they would have looked like this. Instead, it was actually developed by Smoking Car Productions, a company set up in 1993 by Mechner using some of the proceeds from the success of the *Prince Of Persia* franchise.

No simple adventure

game, *The Last Express* is also a period drama. The WWI setting demanded a great deal of historical research into both the Orient Express's final journey before hostilities broke out and the distinctive look of the train itself (a surviving sleeper car was found in Athens and extensively photographed). But the game's





Most pre-1914 Orient Express carriages were destroyed in WWI, but the team found two compartments in Greece. "A guy tried to sell Jordan one of the cars," says Netter, "but there was no way to move it"



HOLLYWOOD EXPRESS

After taking *Prince Of Persia* to Hollywood, could Mechner be about to do the same with *The Last Express*? He won't confirm it, but director Paul Verhoeven has, describing it as "The Lady Vanishes with a dash of Indiana Jones". It's still in development, so anything could happen, but it's already raising the game's profile. "I don't know if it's coincidence, but in the last few months we've had interest from developers for making the game available for download or on mobile," says Mechner. "I think iPad would be a great platform for it."



real coup lay in its distinctive, rotoscoped animation. Building on his work in *Prince Of Persia*, which saw him videotaping his little brother doing parkour stunts in his pyjamas, Mechner decided to shoot live actors against green-screen backdrops.

"One of the reasons we went with an animated line-drawing style in *The Last Express*," he explains from his home in Los Angeles, "was because we thought it would be easier for players to project themselves into that fantasy and accept the artifice of an interactive game. Full-motion video has that distancing effect where you sit back, fold your arms and watch the scene play out. The more a game resembles film, the more photorealistic and live action it looks, the harder it is for us to accept the idea that we can actually influence or control it."

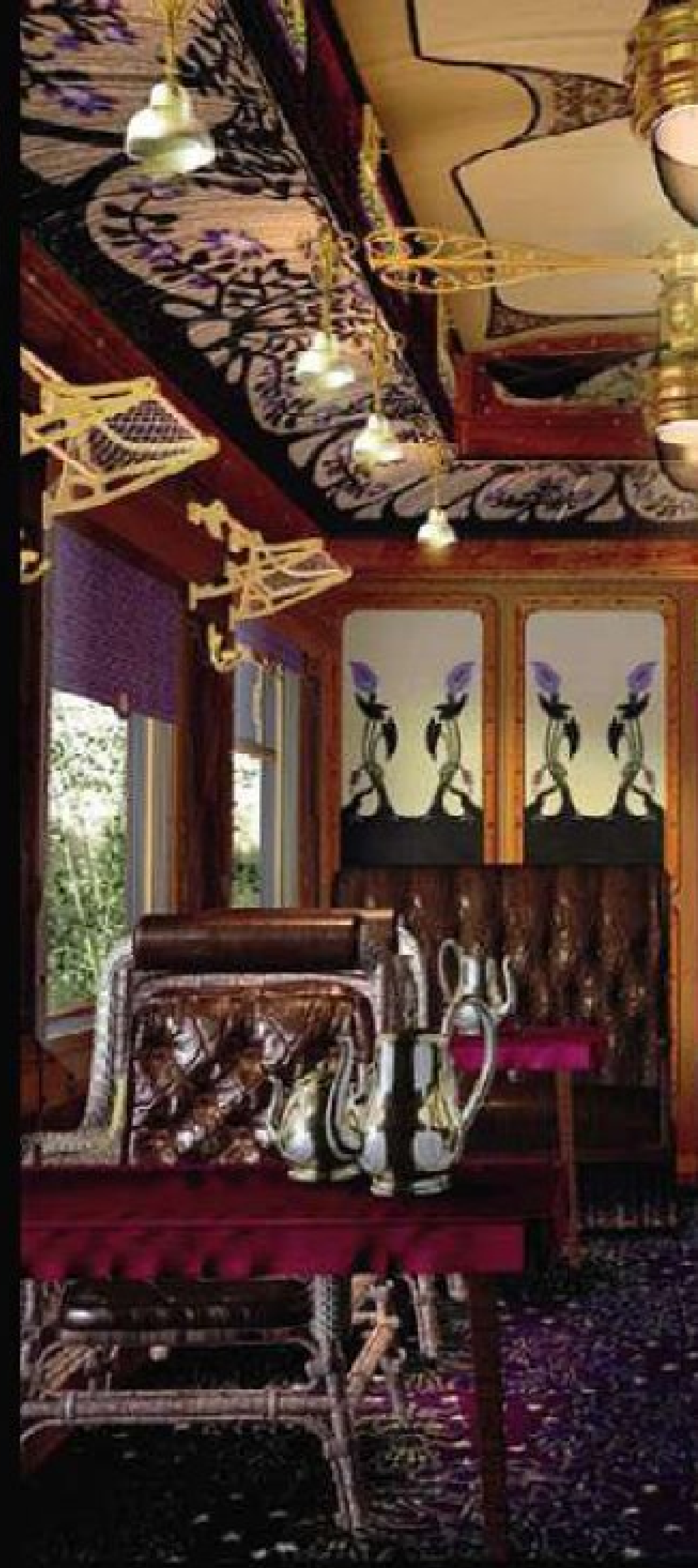
"Jordan had this theory he got from Scott McCloud's Understanding Comics," recalls **Mark Netter**, who joined Smoking Car as the team's producer. "One of the rules in that book is about how the more photorealistic the image of the character is, the less we identify with them down to a point where, if they're too abstract, we don't identify with them either." The idea was to give players "just enough detail that you felt like you were watching something real, but not so much that you pulled away and didn't identify with the characters."

To build the game's look, the team shot in the Cinerents West studio in San Francisco with a cast of Bay Area actors. "It wasn't like a big Hollywood set," recalls **Dunya Djordjevic**, who played heroine Anna Wolff. "It was a very creative bunch of San Francisco artists who were putting together this very passionate project." In fact, it wasn't actually a set at all. "There was no set," laughs **Karl-Heinz Teuber**, a Vidal Sassoon hairstylist and jobbing actor who provided a memorable performance as rotund, German arms dealer August Schmidt. "On the floor there was tape everywhere, marking out the train, and because we did the voiceover before we shot, we sometimes just stood and moved our mouths silently."

After shooting was finished, lead programmer **Mark Moran** processed the footage through the rotoscoping tech they'd designed for the job. "The main technology behind it was all about taking that captured image and finding the edges, getting rid of all the detail," explains Moran. "It's about getting the key lines – which ones are important and which ones you need to throw out in order to get a cartoon version of a person." The result was an early version of performance-capture technology.

Using real people gave the game's characters astounding emotional heft. "There is no substitute for a real performance," says Netter. After seeing Tatiana, the teenage Russian aristocrat, run past you through the train's corridor in floods of tears, or Schmidt flirting awkwardly during starters in the dining car, it's difficult not to agree.

Then there are the conductors, annoyingly petty officials who will stare you right in the eye while thwarting your attempts to explore ("Monsieur, that is *not* your carriage"). The human element gives the sneaking an unusual sense of tension, while the stylised visuals avoid some of the pitfalls of FMV that mean you often feel you're passively watching – rather than interacting with – the actors.



"It wasn't like a big Hollywood set. It was a very creative bunch of artists who were putting together this very passionate project"

If you'd visited the Smoking Car offices in San Francisco in 1996, there's a good chance someone would have thrown something at you and shouted "Catch!" If they did, you could consider yourself part of the family. "In our office we juggled all the time," remembers Moran. "One of the programmers taught everyone how to do it and we'd stand



To prepare for production, Mechner screened LaserDiscs of classic train movies including The Lady Vanishes (1938) and Narrow Margin (1952)



Smoking Car wrote its own rotoscoping software to process the images. "Today you could do it with a series of Photoshop filters," says Moran



With screenplays, casting and storyboards like this, pre-production often felt like a feature film

around having meetings juggling."

It turned out to be a pretty accurate metaphor for the team's management of live action and animation, period drama and adventure game. The team's real trick, however, was in combining the game's ambitious themes with its underlying mechanics.

Most games ask players to master movement through space. *The Last Express* is different. It requires you instead to conquer time. Playing out its events in realtime, or at least an approximation of it, the game constantly saves your progress and lets you rewind the clock at any point so you can explore different options. Do you need to have the conversation with Anna in the salon car before the train pulls into Vienna? Or should you be using the opportunity to break into her compartment?

Meanwhile, characters go about their business following a complicated set of routines. "We created a language where every character has a script," explains Moran. "They all have their motivations to drive the story forwards. At 8pm August Schmidt goes to dinner, and has dinner until 8:30pm. He's hoping he might run into you at dinner, but if he doesn't he might see you from 8:30 to 9pm, when he's in the salon smoking. At 9:30pm he'll grow frustrated and come to your compartment and knock. He's got a long list of instructions. We created this language where we could write the instructions for every single character."

Given Mechner's temporal concerns in the *Prince Of Persia* series – from the first game's hourglass to *The Sands Of Time*'s rewinding – the vicissitudes of time are clearly a recurring theme for the designer. In *The Last Express* it finds its fullest expression. No matter how you finish the game (there are several possible endings even before you reach the train's final destination), you can't escape the external, historical forces bearing down on your character. Turning back time isn't just a gameplay mechanic – it's also the source of the game's masterful thematic irony: no matter how much control you have over the clock, you remain powerless to influence the train's relentless progress.

The Last Express is the best game most gamers have never heard of. With total sales in the region of only 100,000 copies, you don't need a calculator to work out that Mechner was left nursing a painful loss, given its $6m budget. So, what happened? Most obviously, the game missed its crucial Christmas '96 shipping date after testing ran over time.

That was just the beginning of the game's problems, though. Much like its eponymous train, the game collided with fate and stared into the abyss of chaos and disaster. Brøderbund, publisher of Mechner's earlier games, imploded just as *The Last Express* was released, and the title vanished after just three months of sales.

Fate may be cruel, but history puts everything into perspective. *The Last Express*'s cult reputation continues to grow. The game's gorgeous visuals and emotionally affecting narrative mark it out as a work of art that can hold its head high beside any novel or movie. "Any time you make a game and release it, it's a roll of the dice, and you hope it'll be embraced by an audience," Mechner says philosophically. "We were lucky to be embraced by a small audience."



TRAVEL TIPS

Train journeys often seem full of secrets, the private lives of your fellow passengers half-revealed as you share a confined space. *The Last Express* is no exception: pass the carriage of travelling companions Sophie and Rebecca at the right moment and you'll hear a lesbian sex scene "ooh" and "ah" into life. Search Schmidt's luggage and you'll find some naughty playing cards (with Mechner's face hidden on them). "They're really juvenile Easter Eggs," confesses Moran. Then there's the moment after Cath's first nightmare. Ring the conductor's bell and you'll see the train official take his head off his shoulders and – what else? – juggle with it.



Codeshop

Tracking developments in development

Something in the air

Meet the two-person middleware company that has its head well and truly in the clouds



Frank Kane, CEO, Sundog Software

I spy with my little eye, something beginning with 'S'. Not a hard one, this, because it accounts for roughly half of what you see in any outdoor game. When it's good, like in a *Dark Void* or *Stalker: Shadow Of Chernobyl*, the skybox can set the tone almost singlehandedly. When it's not so good, like in the blocky, colour-banded skies above *Gran Turismo 5*, it can ruin it. Furthermore, in the vast majority of cases, it's as close to the real thing as a seascape painting.

"What we bring is the ability to specify any given time of day and weather conditions, and let the SDK do the rest automatically," says **Frank Kane**, founder and CEO of Sundog Software. "So instead of having this pre-baked skybox for a specific set of conditions, with ours you can have dynamically changing times of day. And we have 3D volumetric clouds, so they'll change perspective as you move around the scene. You can fly up and around and through them. Physical simulation is what we bring to the table."

This is not unique. Crytek makes a lot of noise about its volumetric clouds, and Kane's the first to admit that SilverLining, his sky simulation SDK, looks to CryEngine as a reference and competitor. "We don't really try to copy them but we go our own way, making our clouds as fast and powerful as possible by using our own methods."

What is different is Sundog itself, a "completely self-funded mom and pop outfit" in Seattle, which saw a 300 per cent jump in profits last year, and whose client list includes the likes of Boeing, Lockheed Martin, EAD – "all the big names in flight," remarks Kane – the enthusiast driving game *rFactor 2*, and Asian MMOG giants Gamania and Gigasoft. It's the latter sector, we're told, that's sent the company's fortunes skyward. Kane: "Games that want constantly changing vast outdoor areas find our product appealing."

> **"It gives your artists a lot of time to focus on level design and what's important to gameplay"**

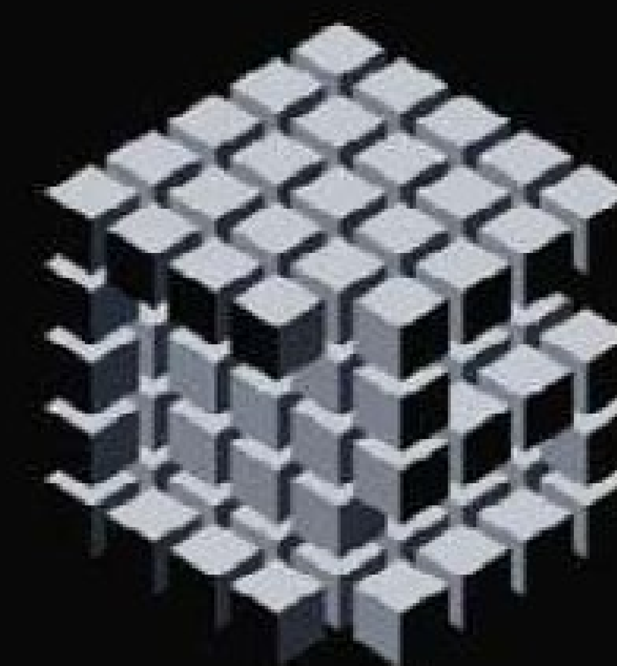
And economical? "Oh, absolutely," says Kane. "First of all, it gives your artists a lot of time to focus on level design and what's important to gameplay. It procedurally grows the clouds from scratch. Rendering 3D volumetric clouds is not a trivial task, and a lot of research went into this







The RC flight simulator *AeroFly* (above), from IPACS, has invested heavily in Sundog's pursuit of photorealism





Beyond individual cloud formation, the size and distribution of cloud banks is modelled, claims Sundog, on surveys taken of clouds in various locations around the world



product. The cost-benefit analysis was a no-brainer."

Faced with covering not just a five- year technology gap between PCs and consoles but an even greater gap within the PC userbase itself, the C++ SilverLining SDK operates in two different modes. The first, 'splatting', uses a special kind of billboard to represent each different puff in the cloud. "That's a very compatible solution that can work on just about any graphics card," says Kane.

At the other end of the spectrum is the marquee feature of SilverLining 2.0, which was released in October 2010. Kane explains: "We have a new stratocumulus cloud that's rendered using GPU raycasting. It's using a very sophisticated reference shader to shoot rays through every individual fragment of each cloud and compute the lighting as it scatters through from the sun, all in realtime. So, we're pushing the envelope at one end but we still have a fallback for systems that don't even support shaders at all."

As well as conjuring photorealistic clouds out of thin air, SilverLining's other key feature is lighting, not to be confused with global illumination solutions such as Beast. "It's not quite the same thing," advises Kane. "Beast is a useful product and ours doesn't try to supersede or replace it. What we do offer is capturing the exact ambient lighting you'd see from the sun and the moon, and how that's diffused throughout the atmosphere. I wouldn't call it global illumination per se, but it is a physics-based model of what you'd see outdoors." Could the SDK plug in to something like Beast? "Certainly. I see all these plugins as complementary rather than exclusionary."

This is the point at which we'd usually talk about the agonies and compromises of documentation, but for this family-run outfit it somehow, Kane insists, isn't a problem. "We just try to have a product that doesn't require too much support, you know? Every time someone asks us a question or raises an issue with it, we make sure we update our documentation and address that in a couple of days, if we can. SilverLining's been in development since 2006 and we've got a pretty mature and stable product at this point. The support costs are actually quite low, even though our customer based has exploded."

The company, meanwhile, has a few new R&D contractors here, a marketing and web design person there, but is happier staying small, even when its ambitions are huge. "We're starting to think more about what's next in terms of the product world: water simulation, special effects, terrain," says Kane. "It's time to start thinking about the next product."



Other clouds you can whip up using SilverLining: cumulus congestus, cumulus mediocris, cumulonimbus, stratus (solid and broken), cirrus and cirrocumulus. How's that for a bullet-point feature list? In terms of performance, the official line is: "Typical scenes featuring dense cloud decks of cumulus clouds will run at 30-60 frames per second on commodity hardware"



Bumpy mapping

Support for DirectX 11 is included in the SDK, but presently offers feature parity with older API versions. However, Kane sees opportunities in new APIs, OpenGL 4 included, for certain cloud types. "One thing we're thinking about is making better use of geometry shaders. So one idea could be to have a really thick bank of stratus clouds and use DX11 to make the surface of that thick, solid cloud layer bumpier and more defined. We've done experiments."

Speaking of bumps, a recent one was the news that Emergent, maker of the Gamebryo Lightspeed engine, which added SilverLining support in 2009, had fallen on hard times. Having powered this generation's massively successful updates to the *Fallout* and *Elder Scrolls* series, the company is currently looking for a buyer in the face of bankruptcy. "It's a shame," admits Kane. "As far as our company goes, we're spread across a lot of engines and platforms so it hasn't impacted us that much financially. But to see a bunch of great people and a smart crew out there in North Carolina… I wanted to see them succeed."

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BY CLINT HOCKING

SOMETHING FROM (CLICK) NOTHING Convergence culture

Part eight: Future past

Seven months ago, when I began writing this column, I suspected the things I would be talking about were mostly wishful thinking. The idea that an increasingly entrenched game industry would see value in connecting casual, social or mobile gamers to their blockbuster triple-A titles through meaningful gameplay seemed likely to fall by the wayside in favour of a more aggressive exploitation via insidiously monetised shovelware. How could developers – constantly understaffed and struggling to make every deadline – ever find the time to build a Facebook or iPhone game that would meaningfully link casual players to their $50-million Christmas release if they couldn't find the time to make their beta?

The World Of Warcraft Armoury has been around for quite a while, but let's face it: Blizzard can afford to put a man on the Moon if they want to, so they're not much of a model for the rest. Various *Spore*-based browser apps allow you to look at the Sporepedia on a mobile device, but these offer no gameplay to speak of, and aren't even built by EA. The best that the year's biggest releases could muster – such as *Call Of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* – were fan-made game guides and various utilities for mobile devices that allowed you to find intel drops, know what perks and killstreak rewards were coming, and read some map strategies. While useful, none of these things were meaningfully linking different groups of players to a single, unified experience.

I wasn't the only non-believer, either. I received plenty of emails from people who are sceptical of the idea that some 40-year-old executive might want to manage a crime family from his Android phone, and in doing so, drive a component of the open-world urban crime game that his son is playing at home. More openly hostile emails condemned me for selling out to the marketing vampires I identified in the intro for saying that we could do everything I was suggesting while making a profit, and others accused me of undermining the ultimate goal of building the perfect immersive simulation of everything.

But while my pipedreams and prognostications may remain heretical for some people, they might also end up coming true. *Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood* – developed by my esteemed former co-workers – has done a fantastic job of opening the door for a huge audience of casual and social gamers to peer into the amazing and beautiful world of Renaissance Italy and the life of Ezio. I had no idea *Assassins's Creed: Legacy* was being developed, but it achieves many of the things I suggested months ago (and, in many ways, better than I imagined – which is no surprise, knowing who was involved). This is an important first step towards the future that I'm talking about, because it challenges the notion that the kinds of fantasies gamers are interested in are inaccessible to a broader audience. We may have always suspected that the fantasy of *Assassin's Creed* had a broad appeal beyond the existing audience of a few million hardcore gamers – but we couldn't prove it. Now we can. Soon we'll be able to measure the appeal of that fantasy to a real audience.

> "While my pipedreams and prognostications may remain heretical for some people, they might also end up coming true"

Dust 514 – a shooter based in the world of *Eve Online* and currently in development – openly attempts to link two of the most hardcore audiences of gamers out there: competitive online FPS players and dedicated PvP MMO players. While the potential scope of this intramedia link is smaller than that which would connect *Assassin's Creed* on console to Facebook gamers, the data will be just as interesting and important. Will an audience of 'me first' shooter players accept the cascade of consequences that emerge from the proposed design? Will they – for example – willingly engage in a battle that they know they can't win in order to achieve the strategic goal of a group of players in *Eve*? Will *Eve* players be willing to leave their best-laid invasion plans in the hands of a bunch of bickering 14-year-olds with hyper-conductive nervous systems? Is the patience and ruthless plotting of the *Eve* community compatible with the twitchy thirst for chaos of an FPS community?

And perhaps the most important question raised by these games is whether or not the connection between these different audiences will act as a gateway between the games. Will people who have never picked up a controller and played a console game before give *Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood* a chance if they are invested in its Facebook counterpart *Legacy*? Will ageing shooter fans who play *Dust 514* decide to give *Eve* a try when their reflexes fail them and they fall under the curve?

Before this article ever sees print, we'll have answers to these and other questions, and developers will already be hard at work on a second wave of games that strive to do even more than I imagined. As William Gibson once said: "The future is already here, it just isn't evenly distributed yet."

Clint Hocking is a creative director at LucasArts working on an unannounced project. He blogs at www.clicknothing.com



Illustration: tstokes


BY RANDY SMITH

HI, I'M RANDY Videogame design, etc

Where credit is due

Contrary to popular belief and a caption published in E222, Warren Spector didn't make *Thief: The Dark Project*. I know because I was on the team at Looking Glass that did make the game. Warren was heading up a sibling office hundreds of miles away, working on something entirely different. Don't get the wrong message. From having worked directly with Warren for years, I can confirm that he's a smart, seasoned and capable developer, and a creative leader. There can be no question that Warren has contributed crucially to a number of revered videogame classics and a pile of additional games that receive less attention. However, not that one.

I am also sure that Warren never uttered the words "I made *Thief: The Dark Project*". Warren has a tendency to downplay his credentials, but that didn't stop IGN in 2001 from publishing the breathtakingly ironic: "'There's a tendency among the press to attribute the creation of a game to a single person,' says Warren Spector, creator of *Thief* and *Deus Ex*."

How does this happen? *Thief*'s credits clearly list him under "special thanks". Starting with that data point, it seems quite the leap to infer total ownership from a loose possessive adjective in a Warren quote.

Who does deserve credit for *Thief*? Wow, good question. It's complicated. I would probably say Doug spearheaded the design and Greg directed the vibe and tone. But that would be neglectful of contributors like Mahk, Tim, Tom, Sean and several others who formed the heart of Looking Glass's multi-class programmer/designer culture. What about Dan, Terri, and Laura who wrote the story; the audio genius Eric; or the artists and level designers? We were a loosely organised team of autonomous creative individuals, a far cry from a one-man show.

Clearly, this version is less punchy than claiming one entity was responsible, and that's one reason why the more truthful story rarely gets repeated, but why not say "Looking Glass"? Is it a lust for celebrity? A vacuum getting filled? Who wants this credit aggregation to happen? The press? The public? Developers?

There are persistent murmurs that lately Peter Molyneux is more about grandiose presentations than building software. I consider it unsubstantiated rumour, but I've learned to be suspicious whenever one person takes most of the attention. Do I even care? If I trace the lineage of games from *Populous* to *Fable*, it's clear that Molyneux is a consistent and informative brand identity even if it turned out to be the case that he isn't currently the primary creator behind the scenes. On the other extreme, I've heard that James Cameron stopped an expensive shoot on Terminator 2 so that some hexagonal bolts could be swapped out with octagonal ones more authentic to that particular factory machine. True or not, to me that's a story about intense authorial control. Here is a guy who feels accountable for every detail of his vision, even if it takes an entire team to execute it. As a film industry outsider, should I be concerned that some directors might be less deserving of credit they receive? If I knew who really did what, would it change the value I get from films?

> "I've heard that James Cameron stopped a film shoot so that some hexagonal bolts could be swapped out with octagonal ones"

Interestingly, I think one of the reasons there isn't more diligent policing is that on a practical level, it doesn't matter that much. Allow me to play devil's advocate on this point. What's the purpose of credits? That individuals receive the appropriate praise and blame for their work? That's often going to be a subjective call, especially considering projects can go to crap for technical and production reasons. Perhaps we want to paint a picture of these people as creators? But why do we need to be accurate about that, as long as we wind up finding games we like? Perhaps we want to make sure the right people get their shot, but the industry is still small enough to be a meritocracy where the deserving talent is recognised and lofted into positions of creative control. Sloppy credentials create an economy for opportunists who focus more on advancement through self-promotion than through work, but they're often taking the spotlight from people who didn't want it.

That's a utilitarian perspective. On an individual level, there's the gratifying ego boost that comes with public recognition. There's a matter of principle. I don't want to be fed a reductionist or distorted view, because I'm invested in having an accurate understanding of authorship in all its nuance. Here's what I believe to be true: auteurs are rare in games today and collaboration is almost always the real story. I also didn't make *Thief: The Dark Project*, and, heck, I didn't even make *Spider*. That took all of Tiger Style. As just one example, co-owner David Kalina implemented a different web-building mechanic than described by the original design document, and when we looked at his prototype, we decided it should become the centre of the entire game.

What about you? Do you care who made the games you love? And, if so, why?

Randy Smith was project director of Thief: Deadly Shadows *at Ion Storm Austin, and a designer on the previous* Thief *games*

Illustration: istokes

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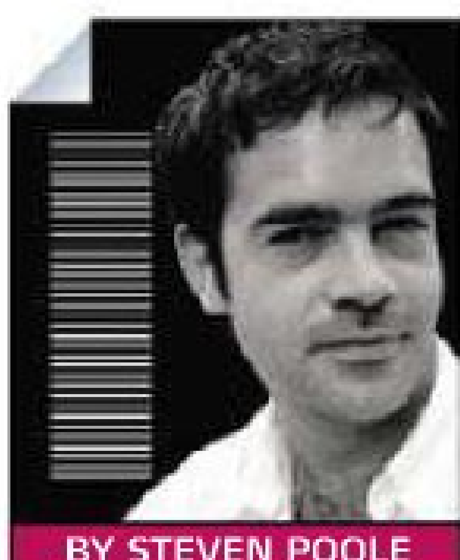
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BY STEVEN POOLE

TRIGGER HAPPY Shoot first, ask questions later

Nil point

Does something in your life suck? Then turn it into a game! This is postmodernism's infantile version of the consolatory techniques of stoic philosophy. Digital technology may now be used to project a virtual skin of motivation and delight over the real world. Through the phenomenon burdened with the unlovely term 'gameification' – in principle, the application of game mechanics to everyday life – gaming threatens to become not just ubiquitous but a conceivable way of living: a lifestyle.

Such is the promise, for example, of *Chromaroma*, just announced at the time of writing: a game for London commuters that hooks into the journey data saved by their prepaid travelcards. Routes and stops are then visualised in a groovy 3D *Defcon* kind of way; you join teams and plant traps at stations for the opposition, earn bonuses for discovering new routes and so forth, and the developers envisage the concept spreading to other cities. Perhaps it will be fun. But the initial report in The Guardian was already crassly overhyping it: the headline called the game "the makeover London commuting has been waiting for". Actually, the makeover London commuting has been waiting for is a more reliable service, with Tube lines that don't close every weekend and trains that can hold more than 17 people. Overlaying a game onto the current state of the system is not a makeover; it's a spangly sticking plaster on a festering wound.

> Overlaying a game onto the current state of the Tube is not a makeover; it's a spangly sticking plaster on a festering wound

The first wave of silly hype about gameification has already created its own backlash, of course, such that sensible promoters of the concept no longer think it's cool just to stick points, badges, and mayors on everything. As a former **Edge** editor pointed out, just adding points ('pointsification') doesn't make something a game. (Though perhaps scoring systems can work for those who will respond to extrinsic motivation. Some of those strange folk who run for pleasure report having fun with the Nike+ system, and being inspired to run more.) And isn't the idea of being 'mayor' of your local Starbucks or indie equivalent, as is possible in Foursquare, rather strange? You don't become mayor in real life just by turning up at the town hall more than anyone else. Otherwise Tommy Carcetti would've had a much easier time of it.

Unfortunately, it seems the people who are still most uncritically excited about gameification are, as one breathless report puts it, businesses who want to "inspire customer loyalty". Of course, the whole idea of being loyal to a business, such as a supermarket with a 'reward card' (which was already an embryonic kind of gameification, or at least pointsification), is deeply suspect: loyalty between people is symmetrical, but a supermarket doesn't care about you except as an aggregation of purchase-preference data and a soft target for spamming its new 'offers' (which is supermarket argot for requests that you give it more money).

So it comes as no surprise that some of the most interested parties buzzing around the new London transport game are advertisers excited about what the Guardian euphemises delicately as "the storytelling and message side of the project" – in other words, they want to build giant virtual billboards in the gamespace. This isn't gameification of the city but imitative pollution of its virtual abstraction. In 2007, billboards were banned in São Paulo, Brazil, a decision that met with the approval of 70 per cent of residents. Advertisers hope that if a version of *Chromaroma* takes off in that city, they'll at least be able to emblazon the virtual version with their 'messages', in which case the gamified São Paulo will be, depending on your point of view, either a utopian site of informational freedom, or another grim victory for commerce's colonisation of cyberspace.

Among other common human activities besides commuting and drinking coffee, the practice of warfare especially is already highly gamified, in the sense that drones bombing civilians in Afghanistan are controlled by joystick jockeys in America. We may wonder how such developments might dovetail with the *Chromaroma* developers' vision of entire cities competing against one another in their game. If Rome loses against Tokyo, should it get nuked? Gameification would only be useful in this arena if it virtualised conflict completely: if warring parties agreed to conduct their disputes entirely in the gameworld without destroying anyone at all. I'll keep you posted on how that goes.

Let's not be too pessimistic, though, about the prospects for gameification improving real life. Imagine a social game, built around a website and iPhone and Android apps, about going to the dentist. You could compete with your friends to see who can get the most holes drilled in their teeth over the shortest period of time, the winner getting a colourful image of a person with horribly sunken cheeks and eyes radiating pain to use as your avatar while posting drive-by insults on Comment Is Free.

Steven Poole is the author of Trigger Happy: The Inner Life Of Videogames. Visit him online at stevenpoole.net

Illustration: marshdavies.com



BY N'GAI CROAL

PLAYING IN THE DARK ...because people refuse to see

No fun

Are games art? What matters more: story or gameplay? Should games be called 'games', or is that term too limiting? There are certain game-related debates, such as the aforementioned, that will likely rage on until the end of time. Another one, which arose during last December's The Gaming Club, Slate's annual look back at the year in interactive entertainment, was this: are games supposed to be fun? (Full disclosure: I was a participant in The Gaming Club in 2007 and 2008.) Late in the four assembled critics' exchange of emails, New York Times chief game critic Seth Schiesel wrote the following:

All of you seem to spend so much energy defending, justifying and explaining games as a serious intellectual pursuit that perhaps you have lost sight of that fact that games are supposed to be fun. That it's OK for media and even art to be entertaining. I believe that games will truly arrive only when their practitioners and patrons get their chips off their shoulders.

To which Tom Bissell, author of Extra Lives: Why Video Games Matter, replied:

You're dead wrong that 'fun' is the point of videogames. No, I say. It's not. That's a fallacy that grows out of this unfortunate etymological ensnarement the medium is stuck with. Games, for me, are supposed to be interesting or engaging, and can arrive there in any number of ways. But fun? Who cares about fun?

Bissell went on to explain that what he means by 'fun' is "mere escapism", and that even "escapism doesn't have to be dumb". From where I sit, Bissell was entirely correct to call out Schiesel's assertion that games shouldn't be taken too seriously. Where I disagreed was with him throwing out the term 'fun' in the process.

One of the challenges in talking seriously about games is that the critical and technical language surrounding the medium is often lacking. And even when it's not lacking – when enterprising people have put in the hard work to create the vocabulary that would help us discuss games in a more rigorous manner – these new words and descriptions end up on the margins of the conversation, employed by a minority while the masses remain blissfully unaware.

For instance, fellow consultant (and game designer) Nicole Lazzaro has since the early '00s articulated her theory that there are four types of fun: Hard Fun (challenge and triumph over adversity; Easy Fun (curiosity), Serious Fun (relaxation and excitement) and People Fun (social amusement). Having witnessed personally and professionally how readily developers can slip into focusing on a single type of fun and forsaking the others, it's easy to see that *Call Of Duty: Black Ops* falls into at least three of Lazzaro's four categories: Hard Fun (the gunplay), Easy Fun (sorting out the plot's mysteries) and People Fun (online multiplayer). In other words, so much for Bissell's assertion that *Black Ops* isn't fun.

> Just because the word 'fun' is associated with frivolity and silliness in other contexts, it's no reason to abandon it

Similarly, journalist Mitch Krpata attempted to parse different types of players in a series of blog posts titled A New Taxonomy of Gamers. I've referenced this collection of posts before, but it's worth mentioning here again because of the way it explores the different motives people bring to the table when they play: skill gamers (those who play for mastery) vs tourists (those who play to see new sights); completists (those who compete against the game) vs perfectionists (those who compete against other people); wholesale players (those for whom their money is more valuable than their time) vs premium players (those for whom their time is more valuable than their money). Again, when considering *Black Ops* through these lenses, it's clear that it has a bit of something for everyone.

In fairness to Bissell, it is not the critic's responsibility to make the case for the nature of enjoyment that anyone may derive from any given game besides his own. Schiesel is fond of quoting Robert Warshaw's maxim by way of Roger Ebert, "A man goes to the movies. A critic must be honest enough to admit he is that man", and it certainly applies here. But my objection to the idea that fun doesn't matter when it comes to videogames is that bound up in the concept of fun is that games are based on mechanics and rules. To deny this is to flatten out what makes this medium special.

Just because the word 'fun' is associated with frivolity and silliness in other contexts is no reason to abandon it when it comes to videogames. Far better, in my opinion, is to build on the work of Lazzaro, Krpata and others to extend our language around different types of fun. I can certainly attest to the need for this kind of vocabulary in my current profession of consultant. But even critics can benefit from a more common language. For more precise ways in which to assess how individual games succeed or fail. To go beyond vague assertions of taste and pet peeves, and deeper into what makes a particular game tick. Seen in this light, 'fun' is not an excuse to avoid holding games to a higher standard. It's the essence of this medium, and the sooner we parse it for its infinite varieties, the better.

N'Gai Croal is a writer and videogame design consultant. You can follow him online at ncroal.tumblr.com



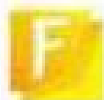
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inbox



Issue 223



ONLINE OFFLINE

Choice cuts from Edge Online's discussion forum
forums.next-gen.biz

Topic: Bring it on, 2011
The obligatory "what are you most looking forward to this year?" thread. Personally, for me, it's *Gears Of War 3*, *Dead Space 2* and *Kirby's Epic Yarn*.
Blue Swirl

Bungie's next project!
EFifty

The 3DS. I can't wait to see what it actually will be able to do.
HaukC

***Mass Effect 3* can't come soon enough.**
Neutral-fanboy

It's *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* that automatically makes 2011 the bestest year for gaming since... 2006, when *Oblivion* came out.
Raiziel

No sign of it – but a new *F-Zero* would be nice.
davyK



Letter of the month wins a DSi XL



"Can you tell I've been playing Xbox?" I cringed when I first saw the horrific *Your Shape Fitness Evolved* advert containing that immortal line, just as I cringed when Jedward excitedly tried to choke me with *Dragon Quest IX* hyperbole. The oh-so-happy families and procession of celebrities advocating the life benefits of DS and Wii are slightly less galling, but I still can't help but long for the days when game advertising was genuinely thrilling. Sony and Microsoft both used to produce imaginative, powerfully affecting adverts (think David Lynch's 'The Third Place' efforts or Microsoft's banned 'Life Is Short' campaign) that positioned gaming, for good or for bad, very much in its own arena.

Instead of flashmobs wielding their fingers like pistols, our passion is instead represented by Terry Wogan doing his best Werther's Original impression

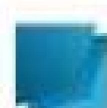
Clearly, from the point of view of advertisers at least, gaming's recent gatecrashing entrance into mainstream culture necessitates a hugely dumbed-down representation.

So instead of flashmobs wielding their fingers like pistols, or a car-crushing fawn, our passion is instead represented by Terry Wogan doing his best Werther's Original impression in the service of *Art Academy*, or a patronising and desperation-soaked explanation of how "this new PlayStation Move controller places you right there".

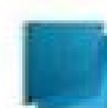
Of course, I understand that such adverts are designed to appeal to a broad audience, of which I, perhaps, am only on the periphery now, and I'm certainly not advocating that all software or hardware adverts should be in some way macabre, surreal or knowing. But am I the only one who doesn't understand why these companies think that mainstream communication must be bereft of creativity? There are plenty of 'mainstream' adverts for other products and industries that take a refreshingly leftfield approach to the delivery of their sales pitch. There are many more 'mainstream' adverts that are awful, of course. But the point is that I can think of no game ads right now that do any justice to the industry they represent – an industry built, after all, on creativity.

While I couldn't be happier at the burgeoning audience for my long-held hobby, or the exciting diversification of the definition of that hobby, I worry that having worked long and hard to shake off the spotty-teenager-in-a-darkened-room stereotype, advertisers are in danger of replacing it with one of slack-jawed, easily pleased automatons.
David Bulmer

Perhaps celebrity-filled, mainstream-targeted ads are an inevitably for a medium that doesn't produce enough of its own stars. It does seem a little strange to push *Dragon Quest IX* as a dress-up game for the X-Factor demographic, though. Do you think there were some disappointed eight-year-olds over Christmas?



I find it strange – and a tad disheartening – that Crystal Dynamics is going back to rugged basics with its *Tomb Raider* reboot. In the time since *Underworld* tried to get a little more down and dirty, your cover star [E223], Nathan Drake, has shown us all how a series can take a more playful tack and run with it all the way to the bank. The appeal of Drake's adventures thus far, for me, has been the wry wit and often slapstick thrills of the set-pieces. Naughty Dog hasn't felt the need to brood at any point during their *Uncharted* adventures (a mistake Ubisoft made with *Warrior Within*) and it pays dividends both for replayability and our attachment to the character's arc. Crystal Dynamics have reinvented Lara three times now, initially with *Legend*, secondly – perhaps – with *Guardian Of Light*, and now with their upcoming reinvention, and they've been quite different (though undoubtedly strong) experiences all round. But I don't feel the same connection to Lara's journey that I did with, say, the original *Tomb Raider* and its sequel. I'm not against experimentation, I'm just far more in favour of consistency.
Alex Risley



I just saw that the new *Tomb Raider* game is another of those 'reboots', where a publisher takes a really established series that's maybe got a bit complicated with lots of sequels and offshoots, or maybe recently the games haven't been so hot.

They generally give reboots a name that matches the one of the very first in the series and have it feature a storyline and gameplay that 'go back to basics'. In *Tomb Raider*, that's apparently the young Lara Croft facing a gritty situation that makes her into a heroine.

There's *Medal Of Honor*, too, and *Prince Of Persia* made a bit of a pig's ear of it, but not as bad as the 2006 *Sonic*. Now that was an anti-reboot.

Anyway, let's place bets on the next game series to try this trick: my money's on *Call Of Duty*. Definitely. *Black Ops* was a bit of a mess, really, and it's time for Treyarch to prove what it can really do with the series after starting properly from scratch. Grittier, back to basics, probably still in the modern age – I can probably wait.
Adam Green

It's difficult to get attached to a character when you know their personality could be changed completely in the next iteration. There's a way that publishers could avoid wearing out franchises so rapidly, of course – and that's make fewer sequels and more original IP. Still, we mustn't forget Nathan Drake's relative youth – how Naughty Dog handles the next generation of *Uncharted* games will be the real test.

The appeal of Drake's adventures thus far, for me, has been the wit and often slapstick thrills of the set-pieces. Naughty Dog hasn't felt the need to brood

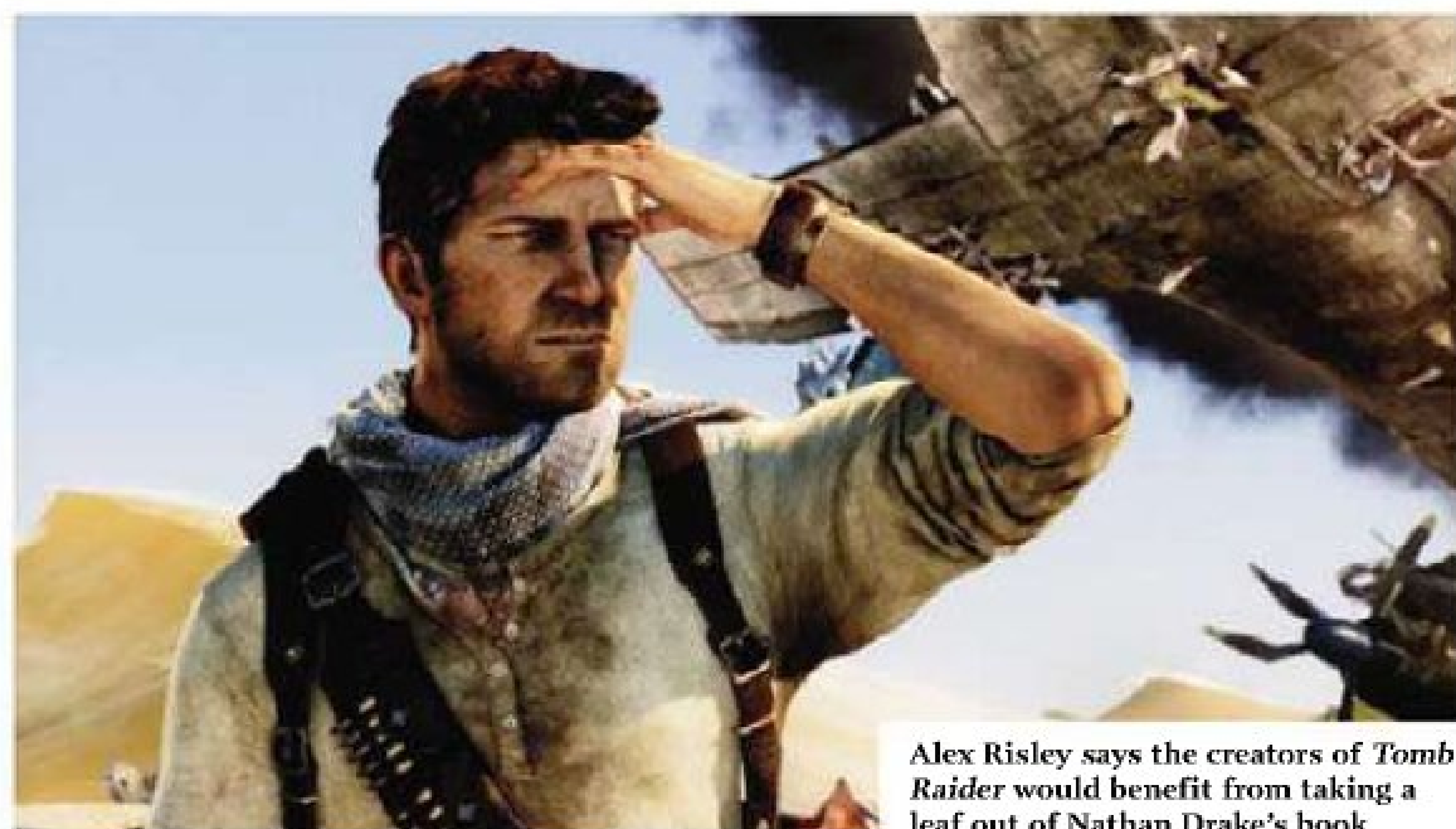
I have never been intimately involved with an MMO. The most I've managed is a series of one-night stands, starting with *Runescape* for the months after it gained popularity, *Planetside* for a few days, *The Matrix Online* for less than a week, a shot at *Eve Online*, and most recently *World Of Warcraft* for a day or two at a friend's house. So, as you can see, I get around, and have an issue with commitment when it comes to the massively multiplayer world.

There are a variety of reasons for my lack of fidelity, from immaturity in the playerbase (*Runescape*), to a time-involvement grinding system (*Eve*), but mostly what I can't get over is the money factor, and its social implications for the gameplay. I don't like feeling tied down – with a good console singleplayer game I can enjoy it as much as I want on one payment, without the need to maintain a social life in the game to really have fun and progress; I'm not paying money for gameplay as if it was some kind of 'you get one month, and I only do menages' solicitation.

I understand the developers' requirement for constant funding on their long-spanning title to maintain quality and improve the service for users. However, I find, in order to get your money's worth in these titles, you need to consistently and for a long period of time commit, make friends who you will frequently play with to make success achievable, and put in enough hours to make up for the subscription cost you pay every month. With a contemporary 'never in the same place for more than a few months' young person's lifestyle, this just doesn't suit me – and obviously with millions of players on their games, advertising revenue should be able to pick up a lot of the slack as the primary income for the bigger companies' titles – which obviously don't need their 11 million players to pay the full subscription every month in order to cut a profit.

With this in mind, E222's piece on *Guild Wars 2* caught my eye. It appeared to offer realtime MMORPG action gameplay, which I have enjoyed in other titles, but obviously without this enforced contract gameplay and the longer-term social ties required for success in other MMOs. I had seen the original, but at that time was in an even less appropriate place to make a move on an in-depth MMO. Other titles have been tempting – *APB*, for example, with its optional pay-as-you-go system – but we all know how that turned out – the gameplay just didn't deliver the goods. I'll have to wait and see, but hopefully *Guild Wars 2* will provide a healthy relationship for an MMO virgin like myself when it goes on the market.
Alex Shedlock

The ever-increasing popularity of free-to-play business models might just offer you a solution – even *APB* will be relaunching using that model later this year. Advertising, meanwhile, is difficult to deploy – nothing ruins carefully crafted lore like a Coca-Cola billboard, which is partly why the entire world of in-game ads is facing some difficult questions right now.



Alex Risley says the creators of *Tomb Raider* would benefit from taking a leaf out of Nathan Drake's book



Topic: That Warhawk Effect
Occasionaly when I am taking a stroll I envisage a Green Line beaming my way or a Land Mine afore me that I have noticed just too late... and momentarily panic, for one instant expecting the end to arrive. Does this mean that I've played too much *Warhawk* over the years, and does anyone else suffer such 'combat fatigue' from this or other games? Maybe I should just smoke less?
Jet Set Willy

No. Because I'm not mental.
darthjim

I kept looking at cars last week and wondering how they would handle on the Top Gear track! Not quite battle fatigue I guess, though. Also, *Mirror's Edge* made me look for the best 'lines' to run should I have to escape to the rooftops quickly.
mr t-301

Okay, it would appear we have another mental.
darthjim

Selecting a car in *Hot Pursuit* makes me wish my own car sounded like it had some balls. Otherwise, no, I don't see conversation trees during meetings or see how much money I have in my account when I approach goods or services.
Neutral-fanboy

It took me three years after *GoldenEye* to stop going "pew-pew" at each and every CCTV I saw.
acemuzzy

In the pub on Monday there were four red baubles hanging by the fireplace under the TV; the third one down was a bauble's width to the left of the others which were all in line. I wanted to straighten them into a line of four to create a watermelon...
the daddy

In E220 you asked for comments about parenting killing gaming time, and saving in games.

As a parent of two small children, I can sure say that it is very hard to get time for games. At the top of my wishlist is a possibility to save the game at will, preferably even within a

Continued

cutscene. If it was up to me, all games would have a 'parental gaming choice' that would include this. I don't mind if the Achievements are taken away from the game if I play like this. I understand that the experience of playing the game can change severely and it will not be for everyone, but that is the point: this is for people like me (and maybe for casual players too). This would increase my gaming time as I would start to play at times when I now don't even think about starting up a game, and I am sure that I am not alone in this. To not include this possibility seems stupid to me. Interactivity should mean choices, right?
Hakan Jansson

Since moving to a smaller house, my complete **Edge** collection (yes, every edition) has been carefully boxed and placed in storage, waiting for the day when I finally get to have a dedicated games room. I am nearly 40 and worry less about what people think as I dust off an early edition and get misty eyed. I mumble on about 'classics' and 'important moments' or trends. I enjoy reading old reviews of PlayStation and Saturn games and searching out the defining **Edge** view on each generation. The *Super Mario 64* review – first to receive the coveted top score. Then those that followed – *GT*, *Ocarina Of Time*, *Halo*. All classic reviews.

All of them have an important part in my memory of the moment. I don't always agree, of course, but you never fail to connect with me as a gamer. I imagine that in ten years' time I will look back on current articles – 3DS (I'm excited) and Kinect (a bit 'whatever' at the moment), for example – and smile. **Edge** is the voice that makes sense of this incredibly exciting pastime of mine.

This brings me to the *Halo: Reach* review. I would love to have seen it get 10. For me it is the game I have been waiting for since I just couldn't squeeze any more out of *Halo 1*. This letter isn't about the score, though – I understand the 9, and you are probably right. It didn't move things on enough; it didn't feel the leap that a 10 should.

The issue I have is that in ten years' time as I lovingly leaf through my collection, in my spacious, fully functioning games room/shrine, where will I find the *Halo: Reach* review? Picture the scene. Sunday afternoon, cup of tea in hand. "Remember *Reach*?" my wife and co-op partner through all *Halo*s will ask. "Oh, yes," I will reply. "Now, what did **Edge** say about that?" The problem? I won't know because you didn't print it. Of course I read the review online – it was a great review – but what about consistency? What about my collection? I believe a review as important as *Reach* should be printed in order to maintain the integrity of the magazine. If during the move I somehow missed the printed review then please accept my apologies. If, however, you simply decided it didn't need to be printed then please think again. In an age of endless, mediocre journalism, **Edge** must take a stand. You are a printed publication and you have an important place in gaming. By all means post your reviews online (even as a paying subscriber I don't mind you doing this), but don't just leave it there where it can be moved, archived or even edited.

Thanks for the memories, **Edge**. Past, present and future. Just keep them coming and please commit them to print.
Nick Jones

Our aim has been to share reviews with our readership when they'll be of most use. Since publishers have begun to cling limpet-like to review code in the run up to release dates, and increasingly ration access via review events, it's an agenda that's become more difficult to make work. In the case of *Reach*, we felt that the size of the gap between release and the earliest issue in which we could offer a comprehensive opinion required us to prioritise printed content more relevant at the time. We're mindful, however, of your opinion – you will have noted the inclusion of the *Black Ops* review in E223, for example. Now, how about this here DSi XL as a gesture of apology?

F

Topic: Will you be gaming on Christmas Day?
I'm away for the Christmas weekend where my youngest nephew hasn't been introduced to consoles, so I won't be. I'll be itching to get back (I already am!) so I can make up for lost time with inanimate boxes that eat binary and shit entertainment. How do you see your Christmas weekend 'playing out'?
B³ano

My girlfriend's sister is staying over on Christmas Day, which inevitably means inebriated *Singstar*. So if me drunkenly singing Famous Blue Raincoat counts as gaming, then yes.
Moot_Geeza

If Bungie don't Christmas me with 100,000cR just for playing on Jesus Day, I'll be annoyed.
FentonBailey

My games room is being cleared and rearranged to make way for the dozen or so relatives (not mine) who have been invited round for lunch. When they've finished stuffing their faces I'll kick them out and put everything back in place. Hopefully the traditional games of charades, pass the pound shop parcel and Monopoly will not take too long on account of the relatives being massive cheats. I can then give an annual outing for the likes of *Samba De Amigo* (DC, of course), *Donkey Konga*, *Sega Bass Fishing*, *Guitar Rock Hero Band* and any other games I can dig out that make people look daft.
Gideon Bible





Fear not, Nick Jones: upcoming games such as *Skyward Sword* and *LA Noire* will get the traditional Edge print review treatment

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